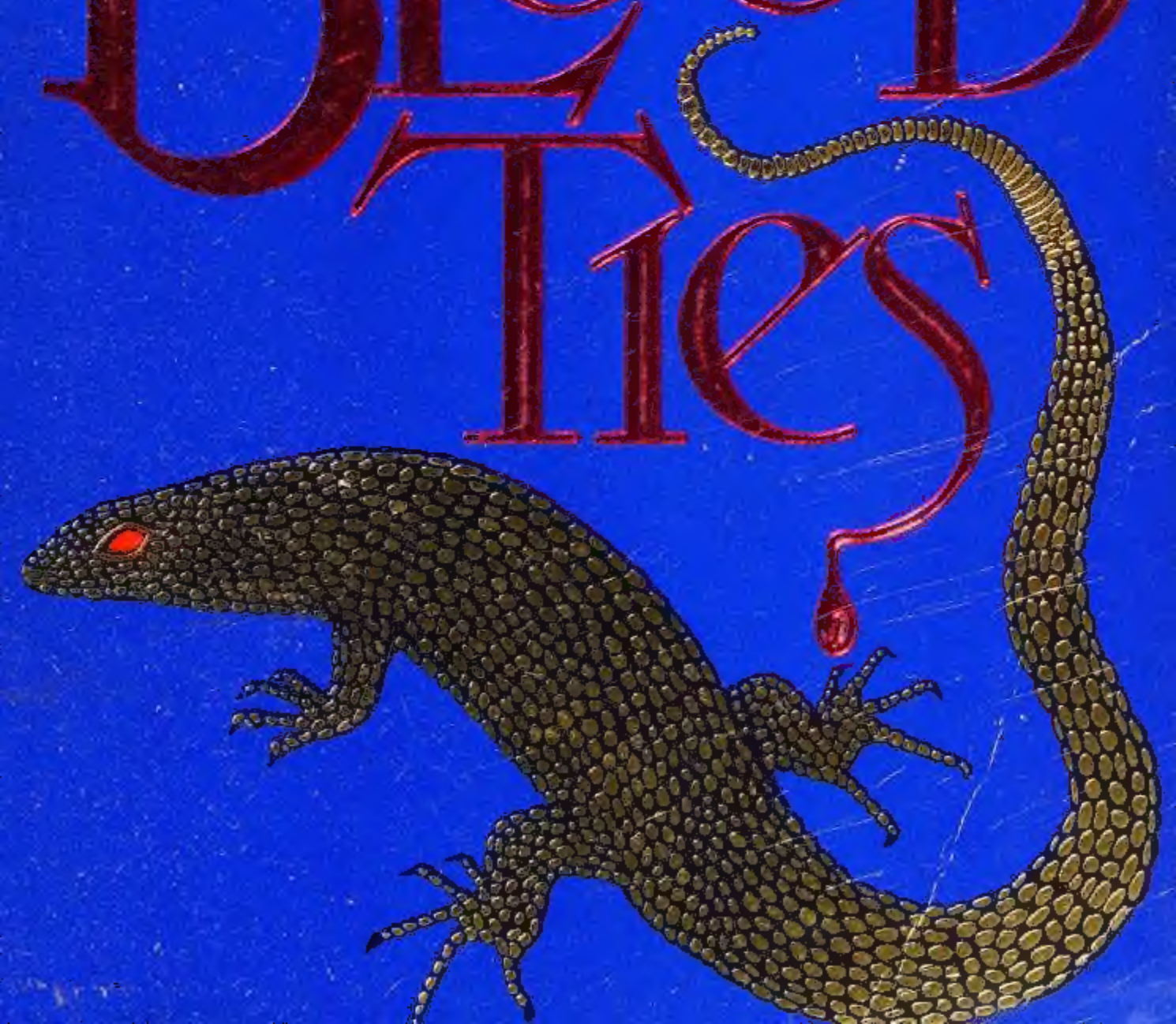
CORONET

A. J. QUINNELL

A captivating novel of quest, adventure and love from the bestselling author of MAN ON FIRE

BLOOD TIES



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BLOOD TIES

Set against a romantic and exotic background, A. J. Quinnell has written a novel combining a marvellous and varied cast of characters with all the suspense and adventure of his much-acclaimed previous novels: MAN ON FIRE, THE MAHDI and SNAP SHOT. He is a highly imaginative story-teller and has now firmly established himself as one of today's leading thriller writers. All the elements of his novels are woven with a wonderful precision, and BLOOD TIES is no exception.

A. J. Quinnell's first novel, MAN ON FIRE, was awarded a 'Best Novel' Edgar in 1981 by the mystery writers of America.

BLOOD TIES

'Another winner . . . the bare bones of the plot have been equipped with muscle, blood and a soul by an imaginative story-teller'

Financial Times

'A highly original storyline and finely drawn characters . . . the story keeps the reader eagerly turning pages' *Daily Telegraph*

'Romantic, exotic, endearing – try it'

Sunday Telegraph

'A. J. Quinnell has pushed his way to the forefront of thriller novelists . . . BLOOD TIES is a splendidly woven tale'.

Yorkshire Evening Post

'Bless A. J. Quinnell – whoever he or she may be' *Lyall Watson*

'Like Dick Francis, Hammond Innes and Desmond Bagley, A. J. Quinnell tells a very good story. On reflection it goes further than that . . . He is, I suppose, a twentieth-century version of the mediaeval morality playwright for whom good eventually triumphs, notwithstanding seemingly insurmountable perils and difficulties along the way – all the more appealing to cynics of my generation who know only too well that in real life this is rarely true' *Sir Robert Mark*

Former Commissioner of Police

Praise for A. J. Quinnell's previous books

MAN ON FIRE

'Startlingly good . . . MAN ON FIRE shrieks out for attention' *Bookseller*

'Barely put-downable' *The Times*

THE MAHDI

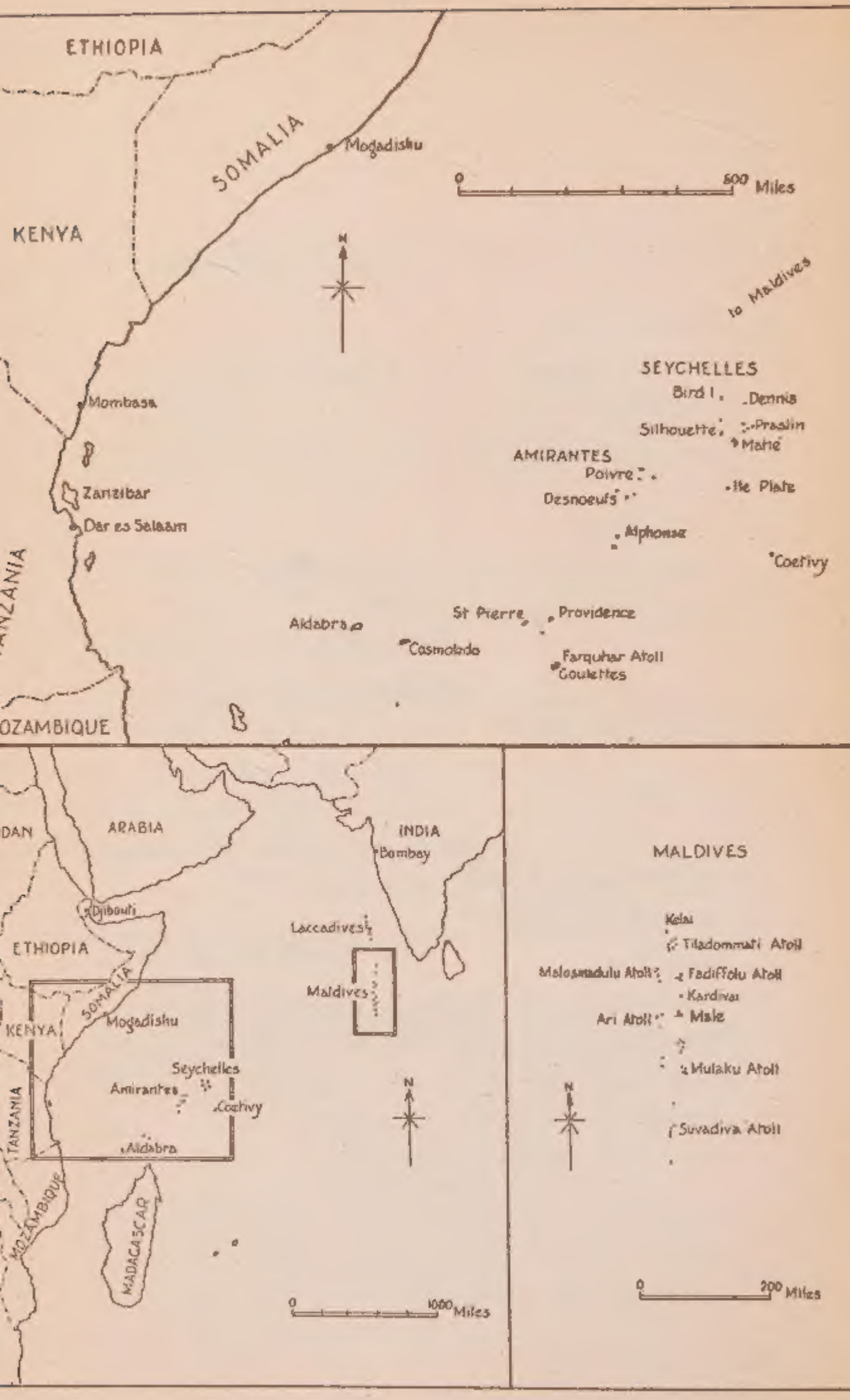
'A fast-moving, technically detailed, slick and professional piece of work'
Times Literary Supplement

'With his second novel, the author becomes a portent to watch' *Observer*

SNAP SHOT

'A splendidly constructed new novel . . . Never a dull moment . . . crisp dialogue and believable characters'
Yorkshire Evening Post

'The action is furious, the characterisation a particular strong point with this author. Honed to perfection' *The Scotsman*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Blood Ties

A. J. Quinnell

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Book One

1

The lift stank, or rather the people in it did, and yet again Kirsty Haywood regretted not working on a lower floor.

It stopped all the way down, people pressing in, until she was wedged into a rear corner behind a bald-headed man wearing a diagonally checked overcoat and sucking on the burned out stub of a fat black cigar. He turned to a hook-nosed woman at his side and grunted: "So I told the guy OK For crissake steal a little; but leave a little! Goddam book keepers!"

Sure, Kirsty thought Always blame the book-keeper. The fat slug had probably been skimming his company and partners for years.

The doors opened on to the ground floor and the occupants spilled out. Kirsty followed with relief, exhaling her pent-up breath. But the odour in the entrance hall was almost as bad. She pushed through to the kiosk and without a word the grey-haired old negro handed her the usual packet of mints and gave her the usual wink which seemed to signify a conspiracy. She smiled back wanly, remembering the first day twenty years before when his hair had been less grey and the wink marginally more provocative.

Out on Seventh Avenue a freezing wind quickly cleared her nostrils. It even dissipated the exhaust fumes from the usual six o'clock traffic jam. She pulled up her coat collar and, sucking a mint, hurried up-town in typically New Yorker fashion. Eyes straight ahead, heels clacking briskly on the pavement, hands plunged deep into pockets, and busy swaying and weaving automatically to avoid the maelstrom of other pedestrians.

She paused at 41st Street, waiting for the lights to change Sleet began to fall and umbrellas mushroomed out She had forgotten hers She pulled a scarf from a pocket and draped it over her blonde hair.

January in New York. The city had been paralysed for the last two weeks by snow. It had been really bad, with a wind chill factor of twenty-five below. It even kept the muggers at home.

Once again, no buses.

Kirsty sighed resignedly. Yet another long trudge home through the slush. Vapour rose in ghostlike gusts from the subway vents, torn away in the arctic wind. A siren wailing from the vicinity of Broadway. Next to her a well-dressed man snarled at a woman behind who had been clumsy with her umbrella. She snarled back.

Kirsty was impervious to it all She had been born and bred in the city. Sirens and snarls; impatience and indifference, were the hallmarks of her milieu.

A green light flashed 'walk' and the well-dressed man was elbowing past her, pig-skinned briefcase held sideways like a battering ram. She walked across town deliberately avoiding the sordid 42nd Street and Times Square area She remembered, as a child, being taken to the theatre there by her parents. It had been like going to fairyland. Gleaming black limousines, fine women in long flowing dresses. Excited crowds waiting to catch a glimpse of a star. Over the years she had watched the almost imperceptible metamorphosis. The encroaching of hookers and pushers; and men with eyes furtive, or glazed with drugs. Sex flashing in flickering neon and the garbage of humanity strewing the streets.

For several years now she had routed her twice-daily journey to keep clear of the place.

As she angled up-town the pavements thinned and her pace eased slightly She wondered why Larry wanted to meet her at Baileys - it was usually 'his' place or 'hers'. Mainly 'hers'. He had been oddly cryptic on the phone, merely suggesting that they have a couple of drinks before dinner. The bar was only two blocks from her apartment but she had never been there. In truth, she had only occasionally been in bars at all.

The sleet intensified and she ran the last few blocks, pulling up under the striped awning, panting from the rare exercise. She pulled off her scarf. It had afforded little protection. She

endeavoured to straighten her hair and then pushed open the brass-bound door. It was dimly lit inside and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust. She saw a room decorated in Victorian style. A burgundy carpet, red satin wallpaper with a raised, swirling design in black. Tasselled blue lampshades and mahogany coloured tables and chairs upholstered in red velvet. There was a long bar at the far end and, in a corner, a baby grand piano being tinkled by a bored-looking redhead dressed in black. There were half a dozen men at the bar and they turned to appraise her. Larry was not among them. They were all of a type she recognised immediately: young to middle-aged salesmen and junior executives, all dressed conservatively and all looking nervously expectant. Instantly she realised that she was in one of the new, so-called 'singles bars'. She glanced at her watch. Six thirty. Larry was uncharacteristically late. She considered waiting for him outside, but she could see the sleet driving even harder at a window; and at least the bar was warm – even overheated.

She unbelted her coat, shrugged it off and hung it on a stand by the door, to more appraising looks from the bar. Uncomfortably cold and damp, she sat down at a table. A peroxide waitress with a lot of teeth and pushed-up breasts sauntered over and took her order for a whisky sour. She felt irritated. Why had Larry wanted to meet her? And why was he late, knowing it was such a place? Larry must use the place frequently for business, and know a lot of the guys who drank there. No doubt, she reluctantly admitted to herself, he would like to be seen walking in and claiming an attractive woman.

It took only five minutes. After a whispered conversation, one of the men climbed off his stool and approached with an ingratiating smile.

"Hi, I'm Ray," he said, gesturing at her glass. "How about a refill?"

She shook her head and he stood there, trying to keep the smile on his face.

"You're alone?" he asked.

"Waiting for my boyfriend."

"Uh huh. Look, why not join us till he gets here. Maybe he'll be real late."

"Thanks – I'd rather be alone."

"OK . . . OK." He turned and shrugged elaborately at the watchers at the bar and walked back.

Within a few minutes the place started to fill up. The ratio of men to women was about five to one. Kirsty observed the mating ritual: the glances and the body language. Drinks offered and sometimes accepted. She could imagine the opening gambits.

"Hi, where do you work, or are you a lady of leisure?"

"No kiddin? Used to know a guy from Macy's Sportswear. Buyer . . . Big guy . . . What in hell was his name? Sure I've seen you in here before . . . First time? No kiddin?"

"Me . . . I'm in sweaters. Top end. Nothin' under ten ninety-nine . . ."

Kirsty looked again at her watch and decided to leave, but as she reached for her bag Larry walked in. After hanging up his coat he grimaced at her apologetically, then walked over, waving casually at several acquaintances. He bent over her chair to kiss her on the lips but she turned her face, offering only a cheek.

The waitress brought him a Martini, glanced at Kirsty's half-empty glass and raised an eyebrow. Kirsty shook her head.

Larry gulped half of his drink and surveyed her carefully across the table. He was in his mid-forties, tall and slim and with a hint of grey at his temples. He almost looked distinguished but his clothes gave him away. He was wearing a dark grey suit cut in the new 'tube' style popularised by Cardin. It would have suited him with the right accessories, but he wore a pale yellow shirt with a green tie, the knot of which was unstylishly large; a matching yellow handkerchief protruded from his top pocket to an extent that decried fashion. He looked, thought Kirsty, exactly what he was – a moderately successful salesman for a large textile company. He would never graduate to the executive office.

"You're mad at me. Sorry, but I was just leaving when that prick Kaufman came into my office and started bitching about late deliveries for the spring line . . . as if that's my problem."

She shook her head. "I just don't like being left alone in a place like this. Larry, it's a pick-up joint."

She saw the irritation cross his face.

"Come on, Kirsty, it's 1965. The girls in here are working girls just like you . . . secretaries, sales girls, book-keepers . . . times change. They want equal opportunities . . . why shouldn't they go out alone if they want to . . . and if they meet a guy, so what? I guess a lot of them are lonely."

"OK, but it's not my scene . . . and you know it. Can we go?"

As they moved to the door he made a point of holding her arm intimately.

They plodded along First Avenue in silence to her small apartment. In the lobby he watched as she anxiously checked her mailbox and saw its emptiness reflected in her eyes

"Maybe tomorrow," he said quietly, and she shrugged and echoed, "Maybe."

The rest of the evening followed its predictable course. For all his enthusiasm for the liberation of women, Larry never extended it to domestic matters. He watched a boxing match, drink in hand, while Kirsty heated up the chicken casserole she had prepared in the morning, and laid the table.

During dinner his attention constantly strayed back to the TV. He murmured conventional words of appreciation about the food, and a few muttered enquiries about things in the office. As she cleared away the plates she knew that as soon as the boxing match was over he would want to go to bed. She sort of hoped it would go the distance. She even considered sending him back to his own apartment for the night, but he was leaving on a sales trip in the morning and would be away several weeks. She did not have the heart to do it.

She was ambivalent about his going: on the one hand looking forward to being alone; on the other, frightened of being lonely.

They had been seeing each other for the past two years. It was a relationship more convenient than exciting. Naturally shy, she found it difficult to meet men. He was a divorcee without children and, with his travelling, made few demands of her. It was only after Garret had left that he took to staying

over once or twice a week. Occasionally they went out to the movies or for a meal. With his alimony payments and her own tight finances they could not afford extravagance. Once he had talked vaguely about taking a holiday together in Florida. Another time, even more vaguely, about marriage. She guessed that he probably slept with other women on his trips. Once she had smelled Vent Vert on one of his jackets. She never used it. She had made a futile effort to summon up jealousy.

As she dried the last of the dishes she wondered why she let it go on. She was still attractive and looked much younger than her years; knew the effect she had on men, had fielded their glances. She decided that something had gone out of her when Kevin died – and something more when she had watched Garret sullenly and silently packing his suitcase. The two men in her life had each distilled so much love, so much awareness and ultimately so much pain that unconsciously she could not face the prospect of going through it again – so she settled for Larry.

She heard a whoop from the living room and then "Jeez! What a fight!"

A minute later he came quietly into the kitchen and moved up behind her, put his hands on her shoulders, squeezed them and nuzzled her left ear. He always did that. Then he cupped her breasts and, with thumbs and forefingers, rolled her nipples beneath the thin fabric. He always did that.

Twenty minutes later he was snoring gently beside her. She was looking up at the ceiling. A nightlight was on the bedside table. Since Kevin's death she had never been able to sleep in the dark. She was tense and her depression had deepened. As always, she made a conscious effort not to compare and, as always, was unsuccessful. It was not that she had failed to climax. That often happened, even with Kevin; but then it seemed immaterial. Climax or not, she had always been relaxed afterwards. Kevin used to make her laugh in bed. It was always a game – an adventure. She used to think that she got as much pleasure from his orgasms as he did. And when she had her own they were momentous, the memory of which would tingle through her days later.

But Larry was deadly serious in bed. She had early curbed

his enthusiasm to talk throughout the act, questioning every reaction. He was an egotist, proud of his virility and technique. Not knowing that without invention they can be a boring combination.

As usual the foreplay had lasted about seven minutes. First her lips. Then her breasts. Then the probing finger between her legs. Her body had responded automatically and, at the precise moment when he judged that her juices were flowing adequately, he had rolled on top of her, grunting seriously. She had made the usual responses, her mind separated from her body. Feeling warmth and a distant sensation, but no intimacy – no joy. The ten normal minutes, and then Larry increased the squelching and, with a final oblivious grunt, spurted into her and after a pause rolled off with ritual murmurings. He fell asleep almost instantly.

Kirsty couldn't sleep. She felt, as ever, abused. She lay awake looking at the ceiling.

"Why?" she asked herself yet again, but the ceiling had no answer. Tears formed in her eyes.

"Kevin why? Why did you have to make that mistake? Why risk what we had? Why leave me?"

She struggled against the tears and tried to drive Kevin from her mind. She used her only recourse – Garret – their son; conceived with so much joy, love and, yes, even fun. The little cabin, the log fires, that glorious autumn week they had spent in Vermont. She tried to picture him now, at that moment: his blond hair, always too long. His serious, mobile face reflecting, for her, vulnerability. She closed her eyes against the tears and tried to conjure him up in her mind from across the world.

It was six weeks since his last letter and yet she could remember every word, every full stop and comma. She tried to find nuances and sought love and understanding.

But the words were impersonal. A short litany of events. A mere communication, perhaps even a mere formality. No. The last words held hope.

"I move on tomorrow. I'll write again soon."

What was soon? Six weeks was not soon. Was he all right? Was he even alive?

Again she had to wrench her mind away. She thought of

the morrow and what it would bring, and then sighed at the question. She knew precisely.

First she would get up with the alarm and put on a robe. While Larry used the bathroom she would make his breakfast and then watch, sipping her coffee, while he silently ate it. She could never eat herself when she first got up.

Then he would leave, giving her a kiss and a hug. He always did that.

She would go into the bathroom, shower and go through the routine of make-up. A critical eye looking into the mirror for signs of age – a line here, or a wrinkle there. Why? Did it matter whether she was a child or a geriatric? Why did she need to be attractive? For herself?

Then the habitual dreary long walk to 498 Seventh Avenue. She hated taking the crowded bus, even if it were running in this weather. Stopping on the way at the deli for a danish and another coffee. Then to her cubicle on the fifteenth floor. Then the books and the columns, and paper cups of coffee and the pastrami on rye for lunch and more coffee, and the walk home. To be alone. Just another January day.

She turned and put an arm over Larry, trying to draw warmth and solace, but there was no reaction. Tomorrow would be just another day.

It was in the beginning. The alarm; making breakfast; watching Larry eat it; the shower and the make-up. Locking the apartment door; going down in the lift. Seeing the old janitor sweeping the lobby floor; asking him, as always:

"Morning, Riley. Has the mail man been?"

And then it changed. He looked up and gave her a toothless smile.

"Mornin', Miss Kirsty. Sure an' there's a letter for you. An' it don't look like no bill."

Her eyes moved to the row of mailboxes on the wall. Very slowly fumbling in her bag for the key, and with a silent prayer she walked across. Her hand was shaking and she had trouble getting the key into the lock. Then the lid was open and the letter was in her hand and a joyful sigh shook her as she recognised the writing.

The old janitor leaned on his broom and watched as she

ripped open the envelope. It was a long letter and before she was half way through he saw the tears form and slide down her cheeks. He put his broom against the wall and moved diffidently towards her She finished reading. Tears were dripping from her chin. She held the letter by her side.

"Miss Kirsty. You OK? Is it bad news?"

She shook her head and smiled through the tears.

"Oh no! It's Garret. He loves me. He's coming home."

She reached out and grasped the hunched old man, needing contact; sobbing as she hugged him.

"He loves me, Riley. He's coming home. Coming home!"

The old man cried with her.

A month later and neither the rain nor the prospect of two or three hours' overtime affected Kirsty's mellow mood It had been raining on and off for a week but a New Yorker learned to live with that during February. She hummed a tune from *Oklahoma* as the fingers of her left hand automatically worked the calculating machine and, with her right hand, she jotted the totals at the bottom of each column. Occasionally she lifted her head to glance at the calendar on the wall to her left It was issued by an air freight company and beneath a photograph of a gleaming plane the last week of the month of February 1965 had been circled in black Earlier days of the month had been firmly crossed off up to the 18th. She decided that never in all her thirty-nine years had a month eked out its time so slowly. It was not the impatience of boredom but that of anticipation. A child waiting for a birthday; a prisoner for his release date; a lover watching for a lover. She glanced at the calendar again, then rebuked herself. A watched kettle was supposed never to boil but she knew with both her head and her heart that it did, just as a month finally passed; even a wet miserable February.

She was sitting in a glass enclosed cubicle looking out across the general office. The cubicle was tiny but she was glad at least of its aural privacy. The others, the salesmen, shipping clerks and secretaries, all had their desks in what the boss, Mr Goldman, liked to call 'the democracy of the general office'. He, of course, had a vast, plush office across

from her cubicle with a rolled gold nameplate donated by the air freight company which was currently flying in for him tons of sequinned tops from Hong Kong. It was a big year for sequinned tops, matched with long velvet skirts. The air freight companies were on a bonanza. A fleet of Boeings chartered by the US Government were beginning the great logistical build up of men and material to Vietnam. They flew back empty until a couple of Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneurs saw the possibilities. They chartered the homeward route for $12,000 a plane Consequently Irving Goldman could buy his hand-sequinned tops in Hong Kong for forty dollars a dozen. Land them in New York days later for ninety dollars a dozen, duty paid, match them with eight-dollar skirts and sell them by the thousands for $400 a dozen to the chain stores. It was why Kirsty was pounding the calculator. As book-keeper for Goldrite Fashions Inc she produced the balance sheet. 'Sixty-four had been a fabulous year and, knowing well the fickle facets of fashion, Irving Goldman was hot and ready to be acquired, at a P/E ratio of not less than twelve to one After forty years in the business he was about to become a genuine, hard line, cash millionaire; sign a management contract with the acquiring conglomerate, sell his shares, have a blinding row with the new company president, sell his condominium on East 54th Street, fill up his Cadillac and head south to Palm Beach for a long autumn of golf, leisurely shopping for unneeded luxuries, vistas of the chilliest Martinis and the gut satisfaction of having won the greatest of all rat races. Problem was that he knew from a lifetime's consumption of antacid pills that sequinned tops matched with velvet skirts could die faster than a rose in the desert. He had three offers on his desk, subject to audit; the most promising from a computer software company mesmerised by mark-ups of two hundred per cent and unaware of the law of returns which figured only in next year's balance sheet.

So Kirsty pounded the calculator to produce the magic figures. She had worked for Goldrite Fashions for twenty years, first as a house model at nineteen, then after her marriage and a husband suspicious of that profession, as a sales girl. Finally, with a mutual recognition that she did not

have the 'pazazz' for selling, Mr Goldman had guided her into the accounts department. With the death of her husband, he had adopted a somewhat maudlin avuncular attitude towards her, always underlaid by a covertly sexual bias. She countered this by constantly enquiring about the wellbeing of Mrs Goldman: a lady justly renowned for her jealousy and possessiveness. A lady who, by ritual and tradition, always tried on the new season's styles for 'fit'. She was a generous size 16 but Mr Goldman, either out of compassion or a desire for a quiet life, invariably had a special line on hand, tailored to fit her but tagged size 10. Everyone snickered at the fitting sessions, but it was as good a way as any to cobble together a long marriage.

Kirsty looked up from the columns of figures to see Gerry Sachs, one of the salesmen, standing on the other side of the partition. He had his large nose pressed against the glass, flat and white. He backed away, held up a plastic cup, pointed at the percolator in the corner and raised an eyebrow. She smiled and shook her head. He shrugged ruefully and shambled back to his desk. Usually at this time of the afternoon he would come in with coffee, perch one large buttock on her desk and spend half an hour regaling her with stories of his love life. She knew they were ninety-nine per cent fiction but she liked him and usually was a good listener But not today. She had promised Irving to have the books finished by the end of the month but her own schedule was the 21st. She wanted to be free and clear during the last week.

For the next hour she worked without interruption but then the door to the showroom opened and Tracy, the receptionist, came into the general office followed by a large policeman. He held his cap in his hand and his few strands of hair were steel grey He wore the uniform of a Captain and as he followed Tracy to the door of Goldman's office Kirsty thought that he looked vaguely familiar. She wondered what he was doing here Had the US Customs finally tumbled to the fact that Goldrite Fashions Inc had been under-invoicing its sequinned tops by a third, thereby drastically reducing the mandatory forty-two-and-a-half per cent duty and, during the preceding year, pocketing an additional $235,000 to the detriment of Uncle Sam? If so, Irving would not be shortly

retiring to Palm Beach. Tracy ushered the Captain into Irving's office and walked back to the showroom, glancing at Kirsty and giving a 'don't know' shrug of her shoulders. Kirsty went back to the books and another five minutes passed before her phone rang. It was Irving and the moment she heard the tenseness in his normally lighthearted voice she knew that the policeman represented trouble.

Would she please step into his office right away? She put the phone down and was engulfed in panic. Was the policeman about to question her? What could she say if he asked her about the invoices? She knew she was an unconvincing liar. Why had Irving done it? She had warned him that other importers were bringing in similar styles and invoicing them at realistic prices. The Customs were not complete fools. Then her panic subsided. Surely in such a case a Customs Officer would be making the visit, not a policeman. Maybe it had something to do with the rash of thefts from the cargo bays of Idlewild Airport. Only last week a truck load of Goldrite tops had been hijacked.

Even so, it was with trepidation that she walked slowly to Irving's office, avoiding the curious stares of Gerry and the others.

She tapped on the door and went in. Irving and the Captain were standing in front of the desk talking in hushed, conspiratorial tones. As they turned she saw their faces: sombre and uncomfortable. She stopped in the open door and Irving crossed over and took her arm and gently propelled her to the grouping of chairs around a low table in the corner, saying as they walked, "This is Captain Buckley, Kirsty. He's come here to talk to you on a personal matter. I'll wait outside; call me if you need me."

Baffled and frightened she let herself be eased into a chair.

"What's it all about, Irving?"

"The Captain will explain . . . I'll be right outside." His discomfort showed. He was anxious to be out of the room and he backed away, nodding at the Captain.

The Captain put his cap on the table and sat down opposite her. He had a bad scar on his jaw, disfiguring the lower lip and giving at first appearance a menacing look. But his eyes although tired were kindly. Suddenly Kirsty remembered

where she had seen him. A month ago she had witnessed a mugging near her apartment and had gone into the precinct station to give a description of the assailant. The Captain had questioned her and had been surprised at the rare expression of civic duty. At that time he had been precise and articulate but at this moment he obviously had a problem finding words. He sat hunched over, his hands on the table flicking a thumbnail against his cap badge.

"What is it, Captain?"

He straightened up and took a breath. "I came personally. We met before at the station a few months ago."

"I remember."

"Yeah, well I went to your apartment – no one there. We had your work address on file so I came up here . . ."

There was a pause, then he looked into her eyes and said briskly, "I'm real sorry, Mrs Haywood, it's bad news. It's about your son . . ."

"Garret? . . . But he's on the other side of the world."

The Captain sighed. "I know. We had a teletype from the State Department in Washington. They received the news from our Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. On the 16th a report was made by the master of the motor yacht *Jaloud* that on February 10th your son was lost overboard in very bad weather conditions approximately three hundred miles off the East African coast . . ."

Kirsty was staring at him like a small nocturnal animal mesmerised in the headlights of a car. Slowly she started to shake her head and the Captain reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a piece of paper with a blue border down both sides. He put it on to the table and pushed it across in front of her. She recoiled from it and started murmuring: "No . . . no . . . no . . ."

"I'm real sorry," the Captain said. "Maybe it would have been better to get that news from someone close to you But Mr Goldman told me you have no relatives here in New York. He told me about your friend Larry and we called his office but he's in Chicago till Friday . . ."

She didn't appear to hear him; just stared at the blue-edged curl of paper, still shaking her head, still repeating the single word "no . . ."

The Captain had been the bearer of such news many times in his career. He expected that after the initial hammer blow she would collapse into tears. He never got used to it, but some were worse than others. He guessed this would be bad – a young widow – the death of her only son eighteen years old – no other close family. He waited for the tears, wondered whether he should move around the table to comfort her. He tried to compose phrases that would help and not be banal.

But she surprised him. He watched as she breathed deeply like a diver surfacing. Saw her fingers clench and unclench, her fine jaw firm up, compressing her lips. She had clear, pale skin and widely spaced blue eyes – and they were dry.

Abruptly she pushed the piece of paper away from her and stood up, automatically smoothing her skirt. She walked over to the window and the Captain turned to watch her: a tall figure looking, even in tragedy, much younger than her years. She stood looking down at the packed traffic on Seventh Avenue; the rain still coming down; the sidewalks, moving mushroom beds of umbrellas.

"Is there anything I can do, Mrs Haywood?"

She turned and shook her head, her blonde hair swaying on her shoulders. "No, Captain, unless you can tell me that somehow it's a mistake or that he'll be found." Suddenly her eyes became animated. "You said the 10th . that's only eight days ago. Maybe he's been found . . . by some other ship . . . maybe."

He stood up. "I'm sorry, it's natural to hope, but there's really no chance." He gestured at the piece of paper. "Our Consul interviewed the Captain and the other crew member. They spent three days in the area searching in bad weather. The nearest land was 300 miles away. There were no other ships in the area. It happened far away from shipping lanes . . . I'm sorry . . ."

The light went out of her eyes and she turned back to the window. Again he expected tears, but there were none. He bent down and picked up his cap and asked: "Have you friends to stay with tonight?"

"No, it's OK . . . I'm OK. Thank you."

He moved to the door and stood there with uncertainty, then said:

"We live near to you. Me and the wife. On 17th and 3rd. There's a spare room; the kids have all grown up and moved out . . . you'd be welcome to visit for a while."

She turned and, for a moment seeing the pain in her face, he cursed himself for mentioning kids: but then her lips moved in the trace of a ghostly smile.

"You're very kind, thanks, but I'll be OK. It was good of you to come personally . . . I'll be OK. Please tell Mr Goldman that I'd like to be alone for a few minutes."

He was puzzled by her stoicism. It seemed unnatural – too controlled. He looked at the window and had a sudden fear.

"You won't do anything stupid?"

"Stupid?" She looked puzzled and then saw the direction of his gaze. "No, Captain. I doubt I have that courage. Don't worry."

He nodded. "If you need anything, call me at the station. If I'm not there they'll find me any time . . . OK?"

"Thank you."

He still hesitated for a moment, feeling inadequate, thinking maybe that he should say something about life going on – an attractive woman and so on, but he decided this woman would find such words little comfort so he merely nodded and left her alone.

As the door closed she went back to the table and sat down. She could not understand herself, it was all happening to a third party, not to her, Kirsty Haywood. She looked around the room: at Irving's ornate desk with the silver framed photograph of Mrs Goldman flanked by her two sons. At the framed plaques on the wall proclaiming Irving's membership of Pan-Am's Clipper Club, TWA's Ambassador Club and the letters of appreciation for donations received from the B'nai B'rith, the Democratic party and an old one from Mayor La Guardia. A rack of samples glittering in the far corner; a gold putter leaning against the wall. Her mind was detached. Then she looked down at the piece of paper and picked it up and read the precise official words: saw the name of her son, Garret James Haywood, presumed drowned. The stark details made a mockery of the word 'presumed'. Three day search. No other ships in vicinity. Outside normal shipping lanes; shark infested waters.

She forced her mind to accept reality, especially at the end when she'd read that his personal effects were being forwarded. Her son's clothes were coming home. He was not.

She crumpled the paper and dropped it into the waste basket beneath the table; then she went outside and faced the ordeal of listening to her boss and colleagues utter the clichés of condolence. Some, like Irving, were embarrassed by their inadequacy, others, like Tracy, overwhelming with words and tears. She rejected the many offers to stay awhile and told Irving that she did not want time off. She would carry on with the books – even that night. It would help to concentrate her mind.

So they left, inadequate, wondering at her strength and puzzled by her lack of emotion.

Alone, she went back to her cubicle and started to work through the invoices, the credit notes, the return slips and the airway bills.

After an hour she stopped and poured herself a cup of coffee and sat looking blankly through the glass at the far wall. Eventually she dropped her gaze to her handbag on the corner of the desk. She pulled it towards her and took out a letter and a postcard. The letter postmarked Galle, Sri Lanka. She read Garret's long, sloping hand telling her that he was coming home. He was low on money but had found a berth on a yacht sailing for the Seychelles and then Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It would take about a month. From there he would try and get a cheap flight home. She was not to send him money or a ticket. He knew her financial situation was tight. Anyway, he was looking forward to the voyage. India had been good and bad, Sri Lanka mostly good. He would tell her all about it when he got home. He missed her and loved her. There was much to talk about. He understood a great deal more now.

She folded the pages and picked up the postcard. It was postmarked Victoria, Seychelles, and dated February 4th. So far a good voyage. The island is a paradise but they were leaving in a few days for Dar es Salaam with an expected arrival around February 20th. He had just enough money left for an air ticket home. He would be with her some time during the last week of February. He loved her.

She turned the postcard over and laid it on the desk. The picture showed a long, curving beach completely deserted. Palm trees arched as if thirsty and reaching for the sea. The caption read 'Anse Royal, Mahé'.

She looked down at the picture and finally her eyes filled with tears. They were tears of sorrow and of love and of remorse. They coursed down her cheeks and rhythmically dropped from her chin.

Irving came back to the office just after eight o'clock. He was meeting his lawyer first thing in the morning and had forgotten some papers. As he opened the door he was surprised to see the light still on. Then, through the glass partition, he saw Kirsty, slumped over her desk. He was at the open door of the cubicle before she lifted her head and turned.

In his life he had never seen such anguish and sorrow on a human face. Her cheeks and chin were wet. What little make-up she used had smeared and given her a haunted, twisted look. Her red eyes had a puzzled look like a shot animal, dying and not understanding why.

He was unnerved by the sight; stood for a moment in shock. He was looking not at grief but a soul in agony.

A few weeks before he had run over a small dog while passing through the Bronx. Instinctively he had driven on, hearing its high-pitched yelps of pain. His wife had insisted he go back.

As he now slowly moved towards Kirsty he had the same feeling as when he had approached that broken, dying animal

"Why, Irving?" she moaned. "Why me? First Kevin, now Garret. All I had. Why me . . . ?"

Irving was articulate only in persuasion. Words of comfort did not come easy. He put his hands on her shoulders.

She lurched to her feet and he found himself holding her; felt her body shudder as she sobbed.

"All I've got . . . taken. Gone."

He murmured into her ear. "Try to be strong, Kirsty. You'll feel better later."

She shook her head against his jacket and screamed, "Later? What is later? I've nothing left. Nothing."

He felt frustration at his loss for words; his inability to

comfort her. He held her close, patting her back as though comforting a child Finally decided that firmness was the only way.

"Kirsty honey. It's a terrible thing but it happened. Your whole luck's been terrible; first Kevin, now Garret. But when these things happen you have to face it head on. You're a strong girl – I know that. When you get hit and knocked down you have to pick yourself up. Remember the things that still matter."

"What things, Irving? What things?"

He sighed. "Come on, Kirsty. You have friends, a good job. A life ahead of you . . . Larry . . ."

She pulled her head back and, looking into her eyes, he knew that neither he nor anyone in the world had the words to comfort this woman.

"You have to try, honey . . ."

Her eyes were not puzzled now. There was something else. A realisation.

"It was me, Irving. I did it. I made him go."

She moved away. Fists clenched, body shaking, face ashen.

"It was my fault," she whispered hoarsely. "Me! I killed my son."

2

In Bombay, on the other side of the world, it was late morning and another person grieved for a lost one. He too sat in his office and he too was a book-keeper. Ramesh Patel was forty-eight years old and one of the tens of thousands of Anglo-Indians left behind after independence. He was unusual in that most Anglo-Indians had British fathers and Indian mothers. His mother had been English and, in the class stricken atmosphere of colonial India, had suffered much indignity at the hand of her fellow countrymen because of her love and marriage with an Indian businessman. Ramesh's father had died in the communal rioting that followed independence and partition in 1947 and his business had been destroyed.

Ramesh's mother had been offered repatriation to England but, with the memory of decades of insults, she had refused. Her husband's relatives, although not rich, had found them a small house and through a family connection Ramesh had found a job as a clerk or *babu* with the Bombay Customs. It was poorly paid and continued to be so even when he was slowly promoted to assistant book keeper. Most of his colleagues supplemented their paltry wages with the all pervading corruption, but Ramesh, by nature and early parental environment, was an honest man and disdained the frequently offered *backsheesh*. This caused amusement and some condescension among his colleagues but he did not mind. He was a simple man in attitudes and tastes and he had lived quietly with his mother, who brought in some extra money teaching English literature part time. He had once, ten years before, fallen in love with a girl from Goa, which was then a Portuguese colony south of Bombay. They had wanted to marry but she was dutiful to her parents who, on learning of his financial position, strenuously objected.

So he had continued living with his mother in the same house outside Muland. His main occupations being the reading of historical novels and seafaring stories; and occasionally having a meal with his friend Jaran Singh, who worked in the city legal department.

This uncluttered existence came to an end when his mother contracted cancer. It took eleven months for her to die and, towards the end when she lay in the noisy, crowded hospital ward, every moment of agony was transmitted from her body to his brain and when the dignity of death ended it his grief was overlaid with relief.

Later, while going through her old liner trunks, sorting among bundles of old letters and musty clothes, he found it. A heavy object wrapped in crumpled brown paper and tied with twine. The wrapping came apart in his hands and he was holding a stone sculpture about fourteen inches high. A sinuous woman, full lipped, narrow eyes, palms pressed together. He had a vague memory of seeing it many years before and his mother telling him that it was a last gift from her father, who had been a minor official in the colonial government in the state of Madhya Pradesh. He had died before her marriage and so been spared the shame. It was a slightly erotic statuette and, with the death of Ramesh's father, it had been put away and forgotten.

He showed it to his friend Jaran Singh, who had passed by to pay his condolences. Jaran had thought it might have some value and in turn had a friend who knew about such things He had taken it to him and only the night before had received the astounding news that it was a tenth-century sandstone snake divinity – Nagi, and worth conservatively 100,000 rupees. That sum represented ten years' salary for Ramesh and his first emotion had been remorse, for with such money the passing of his mother could have been made infinitely more comfortable.

He stood up from his desk and walked to the window. His office was on the third floor of the Customs House and afforded a panoramic view over the government dockyard and Fort George on the right. Like all government departments, the Customs Service was massively overmanned and Ramesh had a lot of free time. Much of it he spent at this

window, watching the movement of ships as they passed the anchorage to and from the big commercial docks to the north.

He loved the sea and ships but it was a cerebral affection, only indulged in his reading. From the library he had borrowed scores of books, usually old, predating the departure of the British. He was familiar with the great voyages of discovery, and the fictional sagas of Forrester and Conrad, and many others. At heart, behind a timid and bookish exterior, he was a romantic.

He watched a dirty tramp steamer move up towards Alexandra Docks. Then he dropped his gaze to the Customs wharf in front of him. A very old forty-foot motor sailer was moored alongside. It had been there for six months after being impounded when its owner, a Madrassi, had been caught smuggling. In a few days it was to be auctioned. He himself had checked the inventory, what little there was of it. The engine was a Perkins, at least thirty years old and much used. The decks needed repairing and the sails were tattered. But still, as he clambered over her with his clipboard, he had felt the tug of the sea in his entrails and been mildly amused at the feeling. She was like an old lady fallen on hard times, the peeling paint and faded varnish like ragged old clothes. He supposed that the wood of her hull was rotten, that her two stubby masts were cracked under the layers of paint; and that her old engine was like a deceased heart with its valves choked and its chambers worn out.

Abruptly, looking down at that boat, he pictured his mother in the last weeks of her life. An old woman struggling with a final shred of dignity against the creep of corrosion. From that distance he could not quite make out the faded lettering on her stern, but he remembered it: the name of another goddess – *Manasa*.

A thousand miles south of Bombay, Lani Sutowo pushed the bony hand from her young breast, twisted free from the clutching embrace and, with the sound of cruel laughter in her ears, ran out of the back door on to the dusty street. She kept running past rows of tin roofed, wooden shacks until the street petered out into a path of crushed coral. She slowed, breathing deeply, then turned to look back. Apart from a

group of children playing on a building site there was no one about. It was mid afternoon and the majority of the population of Male, capital of the Maldive Islands, was resting from the sun. She walked on towards the edge of the lagoon, a slight, forlorn figure dressed in baggy black trousers and a bleached white blouse. Her black hair hung straight down to her waist. When she reached the sand fringing the lagoon she kicked off her plastic sandals and walked slowly along the edge of the water. She combined the facial features of a Chinese with the golden brown skin of a Sumatran; for her forbears had, in the great Chinese migrations of the nineteenth century, moved from Canton Province in China, first to Singapore and then on to Medan on the north-east coast of Sumatra. Her family had lived there peacefully for over a century until the year before when the Indonesian Communist Party, mainly made up of ethnic Chinese, had tried to overthrow the Sukarno Government. The army had crushed the uprising and during the following six months had stood by while the indigenous population of the archipelago had massacred more than 200,000 Chinese. In Medan alone over 1,500 had died, including Lani's parents and most of her relatives. An elder brother had managed to get her on to a trading junk heading for Colombo with just enough money for an onward journey to the Maldive Islands where a distant branch of the family would give her succour.

They had indeed fed her – but at a price of twelve hours a day work in the general store they operated on the outskirts of the capital. She also had to suffer the increasingly insistent attentions of the husband of her distant cousin who had taken her in. She had lived eighteen years but the last one had felt like a lifetime.

She sat down on a fallen palm trunk and looked out beyond the lagoon to the open sea stretching away towards Sumatra. It evoked no thoughts of home. That was past; the last letter from a cousin in Jakarta had told her there was no trace of her immediate family.

She turned and looked towards the town, low and dirty, on the other side of the lagoon. There were few Chinese in this place, just a handful of shop keepers and traders scraping a living. She felt the indifference and contempt of the local

people except when the men looked at her curved body. She did not despair. She came from generations of survivors. Somehow she would leave this place.

A great distance across the Indian Ocean, in the Rub Al Khali – the empty quarter of the Saudi Arabian desert – a drilling crew were working a wildcat well. The temperature was over forty degrees centigrade and the eight men presented an incongruous sight as they sweated on the rig floor making a connection with the next thirty-foot length of pipe. They wore bright orange hats, steel-toed boots, dirty shorts and little else. Their movements looked confused, with much snapping of curt orders from a young giant whose blond hair flowed out beneath his hard hat.

A length of pipe was lifted from the vedour into the rat hole. Spinning chains wrapped on to it. The kelly broken out, mud washing across the rig floor, curses and orders as the slips were pulled, then she was spinning, and the derrick man was pumping mud and, seven thousand feet below, the bit was turning to the right and chewing into another section of jurassic rock, inching its way to the black gold.

The floor crew stood back, kicking mud off their boots, laughing at a coarse joke. The blond giant took off his hard hat and, with the back of his hand, wiped sweat from his forehead He glanced at his watch and grunted in satisfaction.

From behind him a door opened in a shed and a voice called "Cady!"

They all turned to see the tool pusher looking with distaste at the mud covering the rig floor.

"What's this shit?"

Cady's amiable face hardened "Hell, 'push' – we just made a connection."

"So what. You keep the floor clean, you hear. You should know that."

"Yeah – and I know that a good driller gets the bit back on the bottom before hosing down."

The man in the door sneered "You know nothing – you're wet behind the ears Hell, ten years ago they wouldn't let kids like you near a rig."

He went back inside, slamming the door.

Cady muttered an obscenity and the derrick man standing beside him grinned.

"Don't let the bastard rile you, Cady. He's just jealous. He was thirty-five before he made driller and spent ten years at it till they made him a 'push'. Anyway, he doesn't like Canadians – he married one!"

Cady shrugged. "Yeah. Well we made that connection in under three minutes. One of these days I'm gonna push his teeth into his cranium."

The derrick man grinned again. "You do that." He gestured upward with his thumb at the towering rig. "And if I'm up the stick I'll take the Geronimo line straight down and kiss your ass."

Cady laughed and looked out to where a steel hawser stretched from the back of the monkey boards down to a safe distance. If a well blew in and a derrick man was up there it was his only safe way out.

"You do that, Cam," he said. "I'll be out of a job so a kiss on the ass is better than nothing – now let's get this mother hosed down."

3

The parcel arrived in the morning, courtesy of the Foreign Service, but Kirsty waited until the evening before opening it, then she cooked a beef strogonoff for herself and Larry. He had brought along a good bottle of wine and talked to her light-heartedly during the meal, trying to break through her preoccupation.

She had opened the parcel in the bedroom while he watched TV. It was a personal moment and unconsciously he knew he should not intrude.

As she stacked the dishes he complimented her on the meal and she smiled wanly and carried the tray through into the tiny kitchen.

He lit a cigarette, then walked over to the TV set. He was about to switch it on when she called his name. He turned to see her standing in the kitchen doorway, the tray still in her hands.

"He's not dead, Larry."

"What?"

"Garret – he's not dead."

Slowly she carried the tray back to the table and laid it down. She had a strange, fixed expression on her face.

"He's not dead, Larry – I know it."

Larry was watching her with concern. He asked her softly, "How do you know, Kirsty?"

"I just know it. Since seeing his things it's been inside me – but just now . . . in the kitchen it struck me with certainty . . . he's alive."

Larry sighed. "Oh, come on. Sit down and let's talk this over logically."

She moved to the settee and he sat opposite her, noticing the sudden animation in her eyes.

"Kirsty honey, be sensible. It's natural. Getting back his

clothes and everything. The sudden re-association . . . But he's dead . . ."

She was shaking her head vehemently. "No Larry. I know it's irrational – but I just know. I can't explain it . . . He's my son. I can feel him, in my mind and inside me. I know for sure he's alive. Just as I would know if he was dead."

He shrugged. "Kirsty, all the evidence is there. Sorry to be brutal, but many mothers have the same instinct . . . until they see the body. You'll never see the body, so maybe you'll have to live with that instinct all your life. I'm no psychologist, but I know that there are many women whose sons and husbands went missing in Korea – presumed dead. They still believe they're alive somewhere in North Korea or China."

"This is different Larry. There are other things. I know they're incidental and again instinctive, but they're there."

"What things?"

She got up and went into the bedroom and came back carrying a large envelope, which she handed to him.

"In there are his passport, some letters, the official report and a covering letter from the US Consul. Read the letter."

He tipped the contents out on to the coffee table The passport was on top. He picked it up and opened the first page. Opposite the photograph of a fresh-faced, fair-haired young man the word 'cancelled' had been heavily stamped across the page Quickly he closed it and picked up the letter embossed with the American eagle. He read the single sheet, then looked up to find her watching him intently.

"Well," he said. "It's a pleasant, compassionate letter."

"Yes, but more than that. He says that because of the circumstances he interviewed the captain personally and the other crew member. They confirmed the stories they told to the Tanzanian police. He also checked weather conditions in the area at the time and confirmed that they were moderately bad . . . moderately, Larry."

"So?"

"So what he's not said is that he must have had suspicions – else he wouldn't have checked that thoroughly."

"But Kirsty, it's his job."

"No," she answered firmly. "It's the job of the police. I get the feeling he was suspicious."

He spread his hands in exasperation. "More instinct."

"OK," she flared. "But he's my son and in my guts I know he's alive." Suddenly she stood up, slapping a hand against her thigh. "The diary."

"What diary?"

"Garret's diary! He told me he was keeping one – in his last letter from Sri Lanka. It isn't with his stuff. Why not? He wouldn't have had it on him when he fell overboard." She started walking up and down in agitation. "And his watch – he would never be wearing that watch – it was his father's. God, he wouldn't even wear it to go swimming, though it was waterproof. That's missing too."

"Wait Kirsty!" Larry held up his hand. "Please sit down. Don't say anything, just listen till I've finished."

She sat and listened while he talked slowly and patiently. She was going through a natural reaction. OK, so maybe the Consul suspected foul play, but nothing could ever be proved. As for the watch, it was valuable. Maybe they stole it, or it was stolen in India. She was just clutching at straws that weren't there.

"They didn't steal his money," she said belligerently. "Four hundred dollars was handed to the Consul – just enough to cover an air ticket home."

"Kirsty, use your common sense. That would have been too obvious."

"And the diary? That had no value."

"No, but maybe the Consul didn't want to send that on. Maybe there were things in it. Maybe he didn't want to cause you more pain."

She looked sceptical and reached out for the Consul's letter and pointed at one line.

"Danny Lascelles. Of mixed French and Turkish parentage: captain of the *Jaloud*. Lascelles . . . what kind of a man is he?"

"Aw hell!" Larry's irritation finally showed through. "Snap out of it Kirsty. It was an accident. They happen."

"It's not just that," she answered defensively. "You can never understand . . ."

He snorted. "Not with logic like that. Anyway, I guess you'll get over it."

"I'm going to phone him."

"Who?"

She waved the letter. "The Consul in Dar es Salaam. Howard Godfrey."

"For God's sake, Kirsty!"

"Don't get mad. If he's got Garret's diary I want it."

Larry's face turned sullen and he shrugged as if to dismiss the whole matter.

"Do what you like. I've given up trying to make you see sense."

He looked at his watch, got up and switched on the television and flicked the dial until he found *I Love Lucy*. Then he went into the kitchen and fetched a beer and settled himself comfortably.

Kirsty went over to the phone in a corner, pulled up a chair and quickly discovered the complications of phoning East Africa from New York.

She had never made an overseas call before. First she dialled enquiries and got the number of the overseas operator. That lady informed her in a cold, impersonal voice that there was no direct line to Tanzania. They would have to route the call through London and it could take hours. Also there was an eight hour time difference. Would her party still be at that number? Kirsty told her it was the American Embassy and the operator's voice became a little less cold. Was it an emergency call?

Kirsty hesitated and then with a glance at the preoccupied Larry said, "It's my son. He's missing out there and I want to talk to the Consul." The voice at the other end of the line suddenly warmed in sympathy. She would try to get through as fast as possible. It depended on the traffic out of London. Anyway, even if the Consul had gone home, the duty officer would have a number. She would get back to her but be prepared for a long wait.

It took three hours, by which time Larry had gone to bed after giving her a perfunctory kiss. She watched a late movie on television and then gave the kitchen a good clean. Twice the phone rang. Each time the operator told her that she was still trying and waiting on London. The third time she could hear a humming and a crackle on the line and clipped tones of the English operator talking to her counterpart. A series

of clicks and then a faint voice announcing "United States Embassy." The English girl's voice asked for Mr Howard Godfrey – a call from Mrs Haywood in New York. A one minute delay, another click and she heard a voice say "Howard Godfrey here, Consul, can I help you?"

It was a New York accent and even in its faintness and distortion it had a kindly tone. Kirsty burst into tears.

The New York operator saved the day. She quickly cut in and asked the London operator to hold the connection and keep Mr Godfrey on the line. Then she talked to Kirsty, told her to take her time. She spoke practically and briskly, explaining that it was a radio connection so Kirsty would have to talk first and then listen to the reply. There would be a slight delay in reaction, unlike a normal conversation. She would have to speak up.

For a long moment Kirsty could not find her voice. The piece of plastic in her hand connected her with the man who had reported Garret's death. His voice, its accent and the association, took away her composure – made her curiously weak, even afraid. Unconsciously she did not want that kindly, New York voice telling her that truly Garret was dead. She had convinced herself that he was alive and wanted to exist with that dream Slowly she raised the phone to her ear, then lowered it again; took a deep breath, clenched her fist around it, brought the mouthpiece close to her lips and started talking loudly.

In the bedroom the sound of her voice through the closed door woke Larry. He sat up in bed, yawned, switched on the light and grimaced as he glanced at the bedside clock.

The conversation lasted five minutes and it was another five minutes before the bedroom door opened and she came in. She sat at the foot of the bed looking defensive

"Well?" Larry asked.

"There was no diary or watch. He interviewed Lascelles and his crew because they have a dubious reputation But foul play would be impossible to prove. He says I have to accept the fact of Garret's death."

Larry nodded with obvious relief. "Well at least you talked to him. It will help settle your mind."

She said nothing for a few moments. Her gaze was fixed on a

point on the wall above his head. Her normally full lips were compressed into a thin line. The fingers of her hands were interwoven in her lap. When she did speak her voice was flat.

"It settles nothing. Even hearing a voice coming from that part of the world makes me feel closer to it, and to Garret. My son is alive. I'm going to find him." She smiled slightly at his look of amazement. "Yes, Larry. I'm going to find my son. It was my fault that he left and went on that journey. I was a bad mother."

"Nonsense."

"I was. Garret is like Kevin. Restless and outgoing. These past eight years I tried to suppress it. Keep him close all the time. Smother him with attention. So the first opportunity he got, he left home. He wasn't prepared for such a journey . . . and that was my fault. Now he's in trouble . . . I will go to him."

Larry's face became sullen. "How? Where will you get the money?"

"I'll sell the apartment!"

He snorted derisively. "Kirsty! The apartment's mortgaged and second mortgaged. With property prices the way they are you'll be lucky to net five hundred bucks!"

"Then I'll sell my jewellery."

"Jeez!" Larry shook his head. "You're so goddam naïve. What have you got? A string of Mikimoto pearls – three hundred max. A little topaz in a gold ring that's maybe nine carats – not even a hundred. A couple of things from your mother. Their value is only sentimental. Your husband wasn't exactly able to be generous with his gifts." Suddenly he sat up straighter. A thought struck him.

"You won't sell the watch I gave you?"

She shook her head sadly. "No Larry. I won't sell your watch. I don't care, Larry. Somehow I'll raise the money."

She was undaunted. "I'll sell my television."

"Five years old – at least," he rejoined. "Maybe you'll get a hundred."

She then looked at the two rings on the third finger of her left hand. "If I have to I'll sell my engagement and wedding rings. Kevin would understand. It's for Garret. The engagement ring's valuable. It was Kevin's mother's."

Larry looked at the thin gold band studded with four small diamonds and sighed.

"Honey, when you go and see those sharks that deal in second-hand jewellery you're due for a shock. I'll bet you don't raise a thousand bucks."

He leaned forward and said, "Kirsty, I can't help you. What with alimony and my own mortgage, I can't help you I'll be honest. I wouldn't even if I could. It's crazy you're mad. I wouldn't finance it."

"I don't want you to, Larry."

He was looking puzzled now.

"I don't understand you, Kirsty You're going to burn all your bridges You'll come back literally empty-handed No apartment Irving won't re-hire you if you leave him in the lurch right now. Jobs are hard to find. Book-keepers are two a penny You'll give everything up on a vague feeling?"

"It's not vague. I know Garret is alive."

"He's dead, dammit!" Larry burst out "Face up to it!"

She shook her head serenely "A man wrote in his log book that my son died. I will talk to that man."

4

"I have decided," Ramesh Patel said emphatically, and his friend Jaran Singh burst into raucous laughter. They were sitting in their favourite restaurant, a small, very modest place behind the Cotton Green station. The food was cheap and varied because it catered to travellers from all over India. On this night they were eating chicken vindaloo, with dal and chapatis.

Jaran held a chicken leg in his fingers while his laughter subsided.

"All right. Mock me," Ramesh said. "But you will have a surprise and be feeling foolish when I leave."

Jaran took a bite of chicken and shook his head. "It will be you feeling foolish when you hit Oyster Rock or Colaba Point. You have been reading too many books my friend. You are a dreamer, as I am. It is dangerous to let dreams out of the bedroom. Anyway, how do you know what the price will be?"

"Of course I am not knowing," Ramesh said impatiently. "But Kapoor the auctioneer told me that only two or three people have shown interest and then only for the fittings and engine. He thinks it will not be over 30,000 rupees."

Jaran wiped his hands on a rag. "I'm not surprised. That boat is older than you – and looks it."

"Yes," Ramesh agreed. "But she is sound – built of good teak and mahogany. I looked her over with Murjani, the dockyard engineer. He says she needs much work and also the engine, but he will help me. One month, he says, and she can be ready."

"But Ramesh, you are not a sailor. Such matters take great knowledge. How will you find your way about?"

"I will learn," Ramesh said simply. "This morning I found a book in Harilela's. It is called *The Boatman's Manual*.

It is old . . . written during the war by an American. It's got a tattered black cover and looks a bit like an old bible. In it is everything I need to know."

Jaran could not help but be impressed by his friend's quiet determination. He had known him for twenty years and much appreciated his quiet fidelity and gentle wit. He was also one of those Anglo-Indians who never disparaged India or its people, or talked of England as 'home', even though with his fair skin and features he looked more like an Englishman than an Indian. With the realisation of Ramesh's determination Jaran's amusement turned to concern. It was the height of foolhardiness for an inexperienced forty-eight-year-old pen pusher to set off in a very old forty-foot boat to go even 10 miles, let alone a great distance, with only his books and romantic notions to guide him. He told Ramesh so, with carefully selected words. Would he not at least take someone with him?

Ramesh smiled. "Are you offering to come Jaran? You could be first mate, or would you prefer chief engineer?"

"No." Jaran said seriously. "Such an adventure is not for me. I enjoy looking at the sea only from a distance – and then when it's calm. But can you not find someone else?"

Ramesh spread his hands. "Who? Who else do you know who would be so foolish; and I will have little money so I cannot hire someone."

"And when you run out of money?"

"I will work – at anything. Don't worry Jaran. It has been accomplished before. Ninety years ago Joshua Slocum did it . . . and he was older than me."

Jaran was unimpressed. "Was he not also very experienced?"

"True," Ramesh conceded. "But how did he get that experience? – not sitting in an office."

"Which way will you go?"

Ramesh leaned forward, his brown eyes sparkling. "I will first go south to the Maldive Islands. Then pick up the monsoon wind and sail south-west to the Seychelle Islands. Then on to Africa. Up the coast to Egypt and through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea: and so on and so forth!"

Jaran looked sceptical. "What if you miss the Seychelles? They are only dots on the ocean."

Ramesh shrugged and smiled disarmingly. "Then I continue due west; eventually I have to arrive at Africa It is a nice big place. Then I turn right."

Jaran did not smile and, seeing his troubled face, Ramesh talked on, quietly and convincingly. Since the death of his mother he had no real responsibilities, no close relatives. The sale of the sculpture had given him, for the first time in his life, a little capital and an opportunity to turn a dream into reality. All his life he had been insignificant – a *babu*. At the beck and call of others Now, although he was not big and strong, he had a chance to prove to himself that he was a man. That he could live and cope – by himself in the outside world. Maybe Jaran was right and he would crash into Oyster Rock just three miles out. So be it. He, Ramesh Patel, would go to sea in his own boat.

Jaran smiled and reached out and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Very well," he said. "If you are determined to go through with this foolishness, how can I help? – I am no shipwright."

"Come to the auction tomorrow. Afterwards, if I get it, we'll go on board and I'll show you around."

"When will you plan to leave?"

Ramesh's eyes were on fire again. "I'll give my notice tomorrow. I'll work on the boat after office hours and at weekends. At night I'll study. I must leave by the middle of April. My book tells me that's the latest time to pick up the monsoon."

"All right, you lunatic," Jaran said with a grin. "I hope the man who wrote that book knew about Oyster Rock!"

"Twenty-eight thousand," Ramesh said with confidence. The other bidder turned away with a negative shrug and, as the auctioneer slapped his hand on the table for the third time and said "Gone", Jaran slapped Ramesh on the back. "Congratulations, Captain Patel!"

Half an hour later Ramesh was showing his friend proudly over the *Manasa*.

Jaran was appalled. True, he knew nothing of boats and

perhaps could not appreciate the finer points, but his eyes took in the peeling paint, the areas of the deck where the planks had separated and warped, the bent stanchions and sagging wires. He looked up at the short main mast and saw a yard-long crack.

Meanwhile Ramesh burbled happily on, talking of bulkheads, clews, shrouds and sheets Jaran forced a smile.

"I see you've been studying your bible, Ramesh."

"Of course. Come below and I'll show you the accommodation."

As they went down one of the wooden steps creaked ominously.

Below in the saloon it was all faded varnish amidst a musty odour. They went through into the little stern cabin with two bunks and a wash basin; glanced into the dark and dank engine room, surveyed the fo'c'sle with its two V bunks and then another small narrow cabin.

"The head," Ramesh said proudly

Jaran peered round the door and saw the squat toilet with a long pump handle beside it "The head?"

"That's what they call it."

Jaran smiled. "A strange name for something associated so intimately with the bottom."

Ramesh returned the smile, took his arm and led him back into the saloon. In a corner was a double gas ring and, to one side, the door of a cabinet. Ramesh opened the door to reveal a steel-lined ice box. In it were two bottles of beer.

"I asked Murjani to put these in here," he said with a wink. "A sort of celebration."

He opened a drawer and found a bottle opener, took two glasses from another cupboard and carried them all over to the table.

They sat down opposite each other. Ramesh poured the beer and they raised their glasses

"To the *Manasa*," Jaran said solemnly "And all who sail in her."

"The *Manasa*," Ramesh echoed with a contented smile.

They both drank deeply and then Jaran spent another half hour trying to talk his friend into sanity It was to no avail

Ramesh was sublimely confident of both himself and his new acquisition.

Ramesh tried to explain his feelings to his friend. How he felt when he came aboard *Manasa* after he learned that he might be able to buy her. It was somehow different from the first time when he had taken the inventory.

He had sat in the saloon, exactly where he was sitting now. *Manasa* seemed to communicate with him A bit like an old person who has been far and become weathered and wise from experience, urging a young man to go out into the world. Offering to be his guide. Ramesh was eloquent as he tried to make Jaran Singh understand the empathy that can exist between a man and a boat. Before, he thought that it only happened in books; but he had felt it himself Now he owned *Manasa*. She would be his home and his friend. He knew, inside him, that she would keep him safe. Never harm him. With this friendship she would be kind to his inexperience. Protect him until he learned. It would be like a child learning to ride a gentle horse; the horse would feel the tentative, nervous weight, compensate for it. Move carefully until the child gained confidence – and then let him ride free and with the wind in his hair.

It was all wildly romantic and Jaran smiled slightly at the imagery created. He studied Ramesh as he talked and tried to imagine him as a seaman. It was difficult. The man in front of him was always neatly, almost fastidiously dressed. He had short, well cut hair greying at the temples. Shoes, although old and often repaired, always highly polished. He was tall. Not thin, but slender. He had a clerk's hands. Long unmarked fingers, the nails clipped short.

Only the face gave a hint to what he might become. The skin colour was light brown, the cheekbones high, the jaw straight and firm. His eyes were narrow and set wide apart, with dark brown irises. His nose straight and long above a full-lipped mouth. It was a gentle face but with a hint of strength. A strength that Jaran decided was now beginning to emerge. He listened again as Ramesh explained how he felt in communication with the boat, as if there was dialogue between them, between wood and flesh.

Jaran looked about him and said: "The wood is surely rotten."

Ramesh shook his head.

In a month Jaran would not recognise the *Manasa*; and within a month he, Ramesh, would acquaint himself with the mysteries of the Perkins P4 engine, vane self-steering equipment, sextants, bearings and so on and so forth. So would Jaran please save his breath and time and desist from trying to talk him out of it.

Jaran sighed and drained his glass.

Cady threw a lever and the rotary table ground to a halt, leaving an eerie silence. He glanced up at the monkey boards, then grinned at the derrick man and said: "Get your ass up the stick, Cam. I want to pull it before the end of the shift."

Cam started for the ladder but the dog house door opened and the tool pusher's voice shouted "Cady! What in hell's going on?"

"I'm gonna pull the bit – she's done sixty hours."

The tool pusher sighed histrionically. "Come in here," he said and turned back into the dog house. Cady followed him in.

"Shut the door."

Cady shut the door, feeling the sudden cold of the air conditioning on his sweaty, half-naked body. The tool pusher sat down behind the chart-covered steel desk. There was a shelf of geological books behind him.

"What's my name, Cady?"

"Ben Calder."

"Right on. What's my job?"

"You're the push."

"Right again. What does that make me?"

"My boss."

"Brilliant! Fucking brilliant." Calder sneered as he looked up at the towering Canadian. "You're so smart, but you don't know that I decide when to pull the bit?"

"But hell, push. She's done sixty hours with seventy thou' weight. It's standard procedure to pull the bit."

Calder sighed. "Cady, you wanna go on workin' for this company?"

"Sure."

"Then don't start talkin' to me like some fuckin' college educated geologist."

Cady drew a deep breath. "So what do you want?"

Calder sat back in his chair, a squat man with a squat face and no hair.

"I wanna hit the basement by the end of the month." He looked at one of the charts on the desk. "Keep pulling the bit at sixty hours and we'll never do it. So we run at seventy hours. And put a bit more weight on it."

"How much?"

Calder shrugged. "Five . . . ten thou' Make it ten."

Cady's face was expressionless. "'kay, it's your decision."

He turned away, hearing Calder behind him say: "Damn right!"

Two hours later Cady sat on the platform with Cam, the derrick man, watching the roughnecks hose down after a connection. The sun had gone down, bringing darkness with dramatic suddenness, but the rig itself was brightly illuminated by arc lights on the derrick. Calder had gone off to his caravan and, in spite of the constant grind of machinery, there was a peacefulness on the mass of metal.

Cady had an affinity with Cam. They shared a caravan on site and many of their thoughts. Although both hard, tough young men with limited educations, they were intelligent and perceptive. Unlike most oilmen they did not blow all their high salaries on booze, expensive cars or expensive women. Both took their extended holidays in Cyprus, where Cam lived with a girlfriend and Cady rented a little farmhouse in the Troodos Mountains where he soaked in the greenery and coolness after the brown desert.

Cam was saving up to buy a house and marry his girlfriend, while Cady was planning to take a couple of months' holiday and head south to see East Africa and maybe climb Mount Kilimanjaro and do a little hunting.

Recently he had been reading various books about East Africa, including novels by Hemingway and Rourke. He always interchanged books with Cam and, as they sat on the edge of the platform, they debated the relative merits of the

two writers. Cam was strongly in favour of Hemingway but Cady preferred the less glamorous Rourke and thought that he would be a more pleasant guy to know.

"Who cares what he's like," Cam said. "It's what he writes that matters."

Cady was about to reply when the tone of the drive engine changed, followed by a squeal of tortured steel. He leaped forward with a scream at the motorman. A few seconds later, with the bit off bottom and circulating, the entire crew was around the kelly in a mournful headshaking group. It was the disaster feared by all drillers. A cone on the drill bit had cocked up and broken off, causing 8,000 feet of pipe to torque up. The pipe would have to be tripped and the cone fished out. A process that could take days or even weeks.

The off-duty crew started to crowd on to the platform and then Calder was pushing through.

"What in hell happened?"

Cady turned to face him. "We lost a cone down there."

In the glaze of the lights Calder's face literally paled. Cady leaned towards him and, with each word carefully enunciated, said:

"I told you the fucking bit had too many hours on it."

The rest of the crew were watching the two men with close interest. Calder recovered his composure, glanced around him at the ring of silent men, then asked Cady, "How much weight you had on it?"

"Eighty thou'."

"Eighty thou'!" Calder swept an amazed look around him. "You're s'posed to be drillin' with seventy."

"You told me to put more weight on it."

"Bullshit!"

Cady was stunned into silence. Calder looked around him again and asked loudly: "Anyone hear me tell this crap heap to put more weight on?"

"In there!" Cady rasped out, pointing at the dog house. "You told me to load another ten thou'."

"Bullshit."

Cady took a step closer and asked almost casually, "You callin' me a liar?"

"Damn right!"

Cady hit him. One stabbing right to the jaw. Calder had started to jerk his head back but Cady's speed and immense reach ensured a sledgehammer connection. The crowd behind Calder parted as his body arched backwards and slammed on to the metal platform, his skidlid hitting with a clang. The momentum carried him on to his side and he lay still at the feet of a roughneck.

Total silence, then the roughneck lifted a steel-capped toe and rolled him onto his back, squinted down and said:

"Fuck me! Cold as Kelly's beer and a busted jaw!"

Everyone started talking and some laughing – Calder was not a popular man. A few cast appreciative but sympathetic glances at Cady. He turned to Cam and grinned ruefully. "I guess I get to climb that goddam mountain early."

Cam nodded sorrowfully. "I'll miss you, you fuckin' ape . . an' I decided not to kiss your ass."

5

Mount Kilimanjaro is just over 19,000 feet high and Kirsty Haywood looked down on it from 15,000 feet higher. She had a window seat on the BOAC Comet, and the sight of the soaring, snow-capped mountain revived her numbed senses. She had left New York almost twenty-four hours earlier on a night flight to London and, after a two-hour layover, caught this flight for Dar es Salaam via Rome, Cairo and Nairobi.

She had flown once before in her life but that had only been to Florida. The immense distance of this journey was now just sinking in. She had been in the air for a total of eighteen hours and it was beginning to feel like eighteen days. She had declined to stop over at any of the cities en route, both out of impatience and a desire to save money. So far she had glimpsed three cultures only through the amorphous images of airports and fellow passengers. New York to London she had sat next to an old English lady who had been visiting her daughter, married to a US Air Force pilot and now living in Tennessee. The old lady had enjoyed her visit but strongly disapproved of the way her daughter and son-in-law were bringing up their three children. She talked at length about the need for discipline and diet and Kirsty got the message that her grandchildren were overweight and less than respectful of antiquity.

At Heathrow Airport she sat in the transit lounge and tried to stay awake It was early morning and snowing outside, and the passengers looked pale and as insipid as the coffee she drank.

On the sector to Rome she was wedged between a plump Italian and a thin Arab. The Italian constantly tried to rub his shoulder against her and stroke her knee while he talked.

At Rome the Italian left the flight and in the transit lounge the Arab suddenly spoke to her in impeccable English, offering her a coffee. As she gratefully drank the frothy cappucino he explained that he was an official of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and was returning from a fruitless mission to London where he had been trying to persuade the British Museum to return at least some of the priceless treasures that, under British rule, had been expropriated from the Pharaohs' tombs. They rejoined the plane and, for the next two hours, he talked of the history and culture of his country. It came as a shock, therefore, when she encountered the sleezy and smelly Cairo airport.

Flying south from Cairo the plane had been half empty and she dozed fitfully for several hours. The brief stop-over at Nairobi airport had given her a first taste of East Africa: the vibrant odour in the clean air, even in the airport the aroma of flowers and the earth itself. More than being on a different continent, she had felt she was on another planet.

With the take-off from Nairobi and the coppery filtered air again in her nostrils she felt the anticipation of imminent arrival. The flight time was only one and a half hours and within minutes the captain had announced that they were over Tanzania and that Kilimanjaro could be seen out of the right-hand window.

As she gazed down at the mountain she had a sudden feeling that this journey would have an ending but no return to the life she had known before. It was as though entering the plane in New York had been stepping from one life to another.

It had taken her three weeks to wind up her affairs, including Larry.

Over dinner one night she had looked at him spooning up chocolate ice cream and realised once again that theirs had been a relationship merely of convenience. It was as convenient for him to watch TV at her place as his – and she was a good cook. She had voiced her thoughts and they had a row. She was not surprised or disappointed when he failed to show up at the airport.

There had been no one to see her off. Her few friends had uniformly adopted a cautious, watchful attitude. It was very

much the nervous reaction of people on a bus or train who suddenly discover they have a mild lunatic among them. There is a general edging away – a studious averting of the eyes.

Irving had been positively hostile. An attitude brought about by a mixture of practical no-nonsense thinking – and his imminent loss of an experienced and, above all, honest book-keeper.

First he had tried to make her face up to the fact of Garret's death. Then, seeing his arrows deflected by her shield of unshakeable belief, he brought up the practical problems. He reiterated all of Larry's arguments and likewise refused to give financial aid to such a folly. Finally, with an edge of scorn to his voice, he reminded her of what she was. A naïve, unworldly woman. The furthest she had ever travelled was to Florida. Her life was cushioned by routine. She got up in the morning, put on her make-up, walked the few blocks to the office, worked among familiar faces. Her boyfriend was maybe not Rock Hudson but he was a good steady guy. Maybe one day he'd marry her. At nights they'd watch TV, a couple of times a week go out for a meal, or take in a movie and sometimes a show. She knew where she was and what she was. She had no idea what waited outside. Well Irving knew – had travelled a lot. There were sharks out there – in the water and out – mostly out. They'd see her coming and think it was Christmas. Some crazy woman looking for a dead son. They'd pluck from her everything she had. Africa! Hell! There were people there who still used mud for clothing. Never took a goddamned bath in their lives. She was a woman alone. Did she realise the dangers? She ought to stay home in the place she knew.

She had been undeterred, pointing out that New York might not have forests but in its own way it was still a jungle.

At that he had shrugged and given up.

Then she went through the trauma of selling her apartment and furniture and the degrading haggle over her few pieces of jewellery. After paying off her mortgages and buying a round-trip ticket to Dar es Salaam and a Samsonite suitcase, she was left with exactly two thousand six hundred and three dollars – and thirty five cents.

There had followed a frantic week of preparations, including injections and inoculations for smallpox, cholera and yellow fever. She had a bad reaction to the cholera shot and ran a fever for several days, but not once had her resolve been even dented.

She had spoken to Howard Godfrey twice more on the telephone. He told her that the *Jaloud* had sailed for Mombasa, but was expected back in two or three weeks, which would coincide with her arrival. He had promised to give her any help he could but had also gently stressed the futility of her mission. She had listened patiently and then asked him to book her a cheap hotel.

Below her the rolling grasslands had given way to dry ochre coloured scrub and bush, with occasional fingers of green indicating the course of a seasonal river bed. It seemed a vast, tractless, empty country; then she saw a sliver of brown road and the sun glinting on a cluster of metal roofs.

Back in New York she had spent an afternoon in the library and read up on Tanzania. She knew it was a very poor country, only recently independent from British colonial rule. A few months before it had joined together with the island of Zanzibar following a revolution there in which the African majority had slaughtered many thousands of the Arabs who had controlled the wealth and commerce of that island for centuries. She knew that the President of Tanzania, a former school teacher, was a progressive reformer, trying to drag his backward and neglected country into the twentieth century. In the meantime, despite its nominal federation with the mainland, Zanzibar under a violent revolutionary council was pursuing its own radical course.

Reading about it in the hushed confines of the library and seeing the land unravel beneath her reinforced the abrupt contrast between her own existence three weeks before, and the unknown events about to come. Then she felt her stomach lift as the plane dipped its nose and started to descend. A few minutes later she was looking down at green, cultivated fields, more villages and, far away to the left, the vivid blue of the sea. The Captain came on the intercom to point out the smudge of green that was Zanzibar approaching on the left, then the plane was banking and she saw the flat roofed,

sprawling city with its long creeks and ships alongside the docks, and traffic in the street.

She remembered the translation of the Arabic Dar es Salaam . . . Haven of Peace.

She came out through Customs confused, angry and bathed in sweat. She had never known such heat or humidity or arrogantly stupid officials. Even though she had a visa the immigration officer had questioned her at length. How long was she staying? She didn't know. Why was she here? She had the sense not to tell the truth. She was on holiday, wanted to see the country. Where was she going in the country? The questions went on until she told him that she was visiting the US Consul.

"Mr Godfrey?"

"That's right."

Her passport was stamped vigorously and she was waved through to Customs where she spent another twenty minutes watching the Customs officer mauling through her carefully packed suitcase, lingering over her underwear and asking exactly the same questions as the immigration officer.

Finally, again after the mention of the US Consul, he crammed everything back in, snapped it shut and squiggled a piece of yellow chalk down the side. Immediately an African darted forward, grabbed the suitcase and pushed his way through the crowd towards the exit. Kirsty ran after him, trying to recognise his bobbing black head among all the others.

The arrivals hall was a brightly coloured bedlam. Someone plucked at her sleeve, calling 'Taxi Memsahib', another pushed a card into her hand saying 'Kibani Hotel Memsahib – very clean'.

In a rising panic she brushed them away, searching frantically for the man with her suitcase. Then a voice called "Mrs Haywood?"

She turned to find a smiling, plump blonde woman at her side.

"Hi. I'm Harriet Godfrey, Howard's wife. Don't worry about your suitcase. Juma's got it."

In a daze she asked "Juma?"

"Sure, he's our driver. The car's outside. Come on."

She took Kirsty's arm and guided her through the throng.

"Howard had to go to some reception at the Indian High Commission, so I came to get you. I'm grateful, else I'd have to be there listening to the usual boring crap."

They emerged into the evening sunlight. There was a black Chevrolet at the kerb and the grinning African who had grabbed her suitcase was now holding open the rear door. Harriet ushered her in and she immediately felt the flow of chilled air washing over her. It was delicious.

A minute later they were heading down a broad road passing dozens of bicycles, ramshackle trucks filled with people and the occasional car.

"Welcome to Africa honey," Harriet said. "Did they give you a hard time back there?"

Kirsty collected herself and nodded.

"It's normal," Harriet said. "They're showing off their independence; but don't be put off. In general they're a friendly, happy and helpful people. You must be real tired?"

"I am," Kirsty answered. "And a bit confused. I never left the States before, it's kind of different."

"And how!" Harriet burst out laughing and gestured at the rows of tin-roofed shacks and wooden vending stalls they were passing. "New York it ain't," she said in a mock Brooklyn accent. "But it grows on you and there are some beautiful parts of it. Maybe you'll get to see them. Now, about your hotel . . ."

Harriet Godfrey was roughly the same age as Kirsty. An energetic, cheerful woman who smiled a lot and had that firm confidence of someone who has travelled and seen plenty and remains sure of her own position in the order of things. She explained that there were very limited hotel facilities in Dar es Salaam. There were a couple of expensive ones but good. A couple expensive and bad, and several cheap and bad. In a tone friendly, but to brook no real argument, she suggested that Kirsty be their guest. They had plenty of room and she would be no trouble. Later, if Kirsty stayed on a while, she would help her find her own place.

At first Kirsty did try to argue but, looking at the alien

environment and exhausted physically and mentally, she soon gratefully acquiesced.

She stayed awake for another four hours. It was at Harriet's insistence. She explained the effects of travelling through a wide time zone. The jet lag could affect a person for days. The best way to beat it was to stay awake, on arrival, as long as possible. Then flake out and sleep for hours That way the body's mechanism adjusted quickly.

The Godfreys' house was in a suburb called Oyster Bay, a few miles to the north of the city; an area previously occupied by the British administrators and before them the Germans. The house was heavily built from stone with broad verandahs all around and surrounded by a garden filled with banana trees, palms and bougainvillaea. There was a panoramic view through the trees over the ocean with a cluster of small green islands on the horizon. It was surprisingly cool and Harriet explained that the walls were four feet thick, with an insulating space in the middle When it was built by the Germans around 1910 there was no air conditioning and they understood how to build for comfort in the tropics. When the British took over in 1918 they built English-style houses with thin walls and sweltered for the next fifty years.

After unpacking and taking a cold shower Kirsty joined Harriet on the verandah for a Martini served by a white-robed servant. Kirsty sipped cautiously and asked·

"You know why I'm here?"

Harriet nodded, her cheerful face suddenly serious. "Sure . . . Howard told me."

"You think I'm crazy?"

"At first I did."

"And now?"

Harriet put her glass on to the cane table top, reached out and squeezed Kirsty's hand "No way," she said firmly. "I guess you've faced all kinds of scepticism . . . you've got to accept that."

"But not from you?"

"No. I talked it over with Howard . . . Sure, he thinks you're chasing a hopeless dream . . . but he's a man . . what in hell does he know?"

For a moment Kirsty thought that she was listening to words of polite and ritual encouragement, but she looked up into the other woman's eyes and saw sincerity.

"Please tell me why? Why you believe me"

Harriet picked up her glass and thoughtfully took a gulp, then she picked up the frosted jug and refilled both glasses. Then she talked in a quiet, intimate way and Kirsty sat back and, through the background hum of crickets and other insects, listened to the words and drew solace and strength from them.

Harriet had given it much thought. Had identified with Kirsty's feelings. She talked of the proven and astonishing mental rapport between identical twins; how one could suffer the labour pains of another even though separated by thousands of miles; of the super-human strength a mother can summon to lift a truck from a trapped child; of the scientifically proven phenomenon of extra sensory perception – stronger in some than in others. Of the innate ability of some mothers to sense an illness in a child before the symptoms were apparent. She would not say that Garret was alive or whether he would ever be found, but she understood Kirsty's conviction. She had a son of her own, Lester, who was twelve years old and presently visiting a friend's house. Howard would pick him up on the way home. She told Kirsty that when she had first learned of her disbelief at the news of Garret's death she had tried to imagine herself in a similar situation She just hoped that she would have the guts and dedication to give everything up and go look for her son.

Her obvious admiration and support gave Kirsty a confidence she had not felt since first making that fateful decision three weeks earlier.

But it was a confidence quickly tempered when Howard and Lester came home. After introductions they went straight in to dinner and Howard brought her up to date. He was smaller than his wife, dark and wiry. Bald on top, with quick, intelligent eyes peering through thick spectacles. He spoke in a quick, matter-of-fact way, telling her that the *Jaloud* had sailed that morning for the Seychelles. He had tried unofficially to get the port authorities to delay them with an excuse over documentation or something, but Lascelles

had good connections and probably routinely bribed the port officials. Howard had made enquiries at the yacht club and discovered that Lascelles was hoping to get a charter to take a team of ornithologists to the bird colonies on the Seychelle Islands. The job would last a month.

Immediately Kirsty asked how quickly she could get to the Seychelles and Howard grimaced. He explained that there was no airport although one was planned. So the only way to get there was by sea from Mombasa in Kenya. There was an Indian ship *The State of Haryana* which called in at the Seychelles once a month on its way to Bombay. That morning he had checked the schedule. It was due to leave in ten days. The passage took four days.

Kirsty felt deflated from the expectation of an imminent confrontation with Lascelles. She would now have to wait at least three weeks. Her disappointment showed and Harriet said gently:

"You knew from the beginning that it could be a long search one way or the other. Don't be discouraged."

"I'm not," Kirsty answered. "It's just frustrating to have missed that man by a few hours. I'll catch that ship and just hope he's still there when I arrive."

"On that score I can help," Howard said. "An acquaintance of mine used to work in Zanzibar with the American satellite tracking station. Since the revolution they've started to build a new one on the Seychelles. He's there now. I can get in touch with him and he'll keep me informed on the movements of the *Jaloud* after it arrives. At least you won't have to leave Mombasa without knowing if he's there."

"The question is," Harriet asked, "if he does leave the Seychelles where's he likely to go?"

Howard shrugged and explained that for the past ten years Lascelles had operated around the East African coast, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles, with an occasional trip to India or Ceylon. He was a small-time smuggler and gunrunner and sometimes got charter jobs which were usually short lived due to his habitual drunkenness. He was reputed to be a good seaman, even when drunk. The problem for Kirsty was one of communication. If he did leave while she was en route how would she go after him? Ships were very

infrequent. Did she have enough money to charter a boat if one was available?

Kirsty told him frankly how much she had and he grimaced again. Fortunately, passage on *The State of Haryana* was cheap, but her budget would not allow for chartering a boat big enough for ocean passages.

Kirsty shrugged. She would cross that bridge when she came to it.

Howard then said that he didn't want to discourage her but she had to face reality. Assuming that Garret was alive he must have been kidnapped by Lascelles and his crew. Where could he be – and why? Lascelles reported the drowning twelve days after leaving the Seychelles. During that twelve days he had covered a minimum of one thousand miles to Dar es Salaam. A journey he would normally make in six to ten days depending on the weather. Hence theoretically he could have diverted by up to a thousand more miles. That covered a vast area from Somalia in the north to Mozambique in the south and scores of islands including Madagascar. After finding Lascelles she would have to persuade him or his crew to talk, and thereby incriminate themselves in a crime. How would she do that?

Again she shrugged. First she would find him.

As Howard started to talk again Harriet interjected. "Enough, Howard. She's exhausted. Let's talk again tomorrow . . . after all, she's got ten days before that ship sails."

Howard nodded and said quietly, "Kirsty, I admire your determination. But it's only right that I tell you what I think. To me it's a wild goose chase. I think your son is dead. Everything – everything points to it. Also I've talked to Lascelles and he's one hard and mean character. You have to know what you're up against. I'll help you any way I can officially or otherwise, but once you leave here to get that ship you're on your own and believe me, there's some rough people in this part of the world."

Kirsty's eyes were almost closed in weariness but now they opened wide and she leaned forward and said:

"There was a stray cat living in a back yard near to my apartment. I used to throw it food. Well, it had kittens once and I saw a dog . . . a big, mean dog go for those kittens.

That cat just about clawed it to shreds . . I don't have claws but I'm not afraid of any man who's harmed my son." She turned to Harriet "I can't tell you both how grateful I am for letting me stay in your home and giving me such support." She looked at Lester across the table. Short, like his father, but with a round face and serious eyes "Maybe I'm crazy and maybe my boy is dead, and maybe there's no God, and maybe that man Lascelles is the devil himself . but I'm gonna talk to him."

Her eyes narrowed, but not from tiredness, and Lester grinned and said, "In Swahili they would call you 'Memsahib Kali'."

Howard laughed and explained " It means 'fierce'. It's a word used to describe certain cats . like leopards. Now you'd better get some sleep First thing in the morning we book your passage to the Seychelles."

6

Lani Sutowo was lifting cans of peas on to a high shelf when she heard the discreet cough. She turned to see a man in the doorway dressed in khaki shorts, a blue singlet and Jesus sandals. He was tall, with short black hair greying at the temples. She moved to the counter

"Yes?"

He walked forward and held out his hand

"I am Ramesh Patel from Bombay."

Lani was a bit confused by this formality. She murmured, "Lani Sutowo from Sumatra."

They shook hands and then stood looking at each other in a slightly embarrassed silence. He had a piece of folded paper in his hand.

"You want something?"

"Yes, supplies." He smiled and unfolded the paper. "I'm told you have most things here and not too expensive." He held out the paper and she took it and read the neatly written list.

"Yes, we have all this. It will take a little time to get together."

"I'm in no hurry."

She started moving around the store collecting various tins of food and vegetables. Over her shoulder she said "I haven't seen you in here before."

"No, I'm just passing through."

"Oh . . . but there is no boat in."

"I have my own, a yacht."

She turned, surprised. He did not look like the other occasional yachtsmen who passed through.

"Where are you going?" she asked, putting tins on the counter.

"To the Seychelles, then East Africa, then the Mediterranean . . . and so on and so forth." He said it diffidently, as if unsure.

"You must have a big yacht."

"No, she is very small – just under forty feet."

She turned back to the shelves asking "You have a big crew?"

"No. Only myself."

Again she turned in surprise. "Only you! All that way?"

He smiled again and shrugged and then moved to help her lift packets of spaghetti from a high shelf

It took about fifteen minutes to fill his order and they talked all the while, the conversation becoming easier with each passing minute. She elicited the fact that it was his first voyage and how in the opening days he had been terrified to be in the open sea and how he would have turned back if the wind had not been so strong and driving him always forward. About the moments of panic when a forestay had parted and an hour after repairing it, the roller reefing had jammed while he tried to take in sail. He told her of sleepless nights until he learned how to use the self-steering gear properly and the constant worry that his navigation might be wrong and he would hit the notorious reefs to the west of the Nicobar Islands. Finally he described the easing of tension when the weather improved and the sea calmed and he had four days of quiet sailing and the utter relief when he sighted Male Atoll and knew that his navigation had been correct.

A big carton was on the counter filled with supplies. She asked "When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow at first light," he answered with a wry smile. "The forecast is good, force two to three from the north-east. Besides . . . I'm scared that if I don't leave soon I'll get cold feet."

She smiled at that, impressed by his honesty, then she picked up an abacus and, with flicking fingers, calculated the bill. He paid it, then shook hands with her again, said goodbye, picked up the heavy carton and staggered to the door.

"Good luck," she called out, and he turned and gave another of his wry smiles.

In the evening after the store closed she walked down to the port. There were two inter-island schooners moored alongside the Customs jetty and beyond them a white hulled yacht with a flat transom and the name *Manasa* picked out in blue letters. There was no one on deck and she sat on a bollard and inspected the boat She knew little of boats as such, but despite her age was practical and observant. She quickly saw through the new paintwork and varnishing to the old wood beneath. She decided that it was very ancient but it squatted confidently in the clear water like an old dowager in pancake make-up.

She heard footsteps and turned to see Ramesh coming down the quay carrying two large jerry cans. He smiled at her and she jumped and helped him swing them onto the deck.

"Spare diesel," he said as he started to lash them to stanchions. "Have you finished for the day?"

She nodded. "I came to see your boat Is it very old?"

"Yes. Older even than me." He straightened up. "Would you like to see around her?"

"Yes, please."

He showed her around with obvious pride and she noticed the neatness. Everything in its place except for a thick book with a tattered black cover which lay on the saloon table. She asked several questions, showing an obvious and intelligent curiosity. After the little tour they sat at the saloon table and, while he opened two beers, she read the title of the book: *The Boatman's Manual*.

"How long," she asked, "will it take you to get to the Seychelles?"

He put two glasses of cold beer on to the table and said "If the monsoon holds steady . . . about two weeks."

It was nine o'clock in the morning twenty days later that Jack Nelson, sitting on the verandah of his bungalow high on Mahé peak, saw the white sail for the third morning running. At that time of day he always took his breakfast on the verandah, always listened to the BBC world news on his Grundig radio and afterwards always scanned the broad vista of sea through his ex-Navy binoculars. For two minutes he studied the tiny

scrap of white, then he finished the last piece of toast and, with a grunt, pushed himself to his feet. He was a fat man with short grey hair and pendulous jowls. He was shirtless and the loose flab around his waist showed that he had once been even fatter. He moved ponderously into the lounge, sweating slightly, for even at an elevation of 1,200 feet the hot air was motionless.

He picked up the phone and called his friend Dave Thomas, secretary of the Seychelles Yacht Club.

"Hello you old sod. How's the head this morning? serves you bloody well right . . listen, it's still there. About two points further to the east yeah, the current would have moved it a couple of miles . . no, not a bloody breath, even up here. Listen, the *Lady Esme* does her Praslin ferry trip today, maybe she ought to divert and take a look. This lull could last for days . . . well tell 'em old cock, you are the Secretary and all that . . . yeah, she's about fifteen miles out . right, see you at lunch for a snort . cheers."

He cradled the phone and moved towards the kitchen Half way across the room he abruptly stopped, his brown, sagged face contorted in pain. He stood still for over a minute and then his expression slowly relaxed and he exhaled slowly in relief.

At six in the evening the Government launch *Lady Esme* towed the yacht into Victoria Harbour. Jack Nelson and Dave Thomas walked round from the Yacht Club to the Customs quay and watched her being warped alongside Dave was short, bald and fat, but not flabby He sported an astonishingly long handlebar moustache. When he saw the lissom young Oriental girl standing on the deck next to the middle-aged man with the embarrassed expression he whistled through his teeth and said to Jack, "I wonder where he got a lovely little bint like that?"

Jack grinned "An old boat and a young female crew What more could a yachting man want?"

"By the look of things an engine that works," Dave answered.

They soon heard the story. The girl was driven off in a Land-Rover and a Customs man went on to the yacht for an

inspection. Meanwhile, Philip Mondon, the harbour master, strolled over and told them all about it. The yacht was Bombay registered and being sailed around the world by a retired Anglo-Indian *babu*, who knew just about nothing of the sea. The girl had stowed away in the Maldives, or that was the *babu*'s story and she confirmed it. At any rate she had no passport or papers except an Indonesian ID card. She would be detained pending a decision whether to send her back. The boat's engine was about forty years old and had broken down about fifty miles out. They had been drifting for five days and were down to their last gallon of water.

"Bloody fool," Jack grunted. "But what do you expect? Those Anglo-Indians are all useless."

"Give over, Jack," Dave said, embarrassed because all Seychellois including Philip Mondon were racially mixed to one extent or another "You're not in Africa now."

"You know what I mean," Jack said unrepentant; and to Philip Mondon, "You lot are OK, Phil; come and have a drink at the Club."

Mondon shook his head and winked. "Can't Jack. Got a date in an hour and she's better looking than you two."

They turned and walked towards the Yacht Club and he watched them and shook his head resignedly, but in good nature. A lot of ex-Government officials had retired to the Seychelles following independence of the East African possessions. They were not bad people but they often retained their colonial attitudes and prejudices

7

The *State of Harvana* was not beautiful – and not clean, inside or out. She plied regularly between Bombay and Mombasa via the Seychelles carrying cargo and passengers. The first class passengers enjoyed relative comfort in private cabins, all with portholes facing the sea. Second class passengers bunked in dormitory cabins which stank day and night. Deck passengers slept on the aft deck, which was hard but did not stink.

Kirsty stood in the doorway and surveyed her tiny cabin with apprehension. It contained a small table and chair under the porthole. A cupboard to her left and, on the right, two narrow bunks, one above the other. There was a cockroach on the table. She pointed at it and the Indian steward grunted, put down her suitcase and swatted it with his hand. Two weeks earlier she would have been disgusted, but such a time in Africa can bring fast adjustments.

Having been carefully briefed she tipped him ten shillings and told him that she was going on deck for an hour and when she returned she wanted to see the cabin sparkling clean and kept that way throughout the voyage. He bobbed his head and grinned and she turned away down the passage and on to the slightly cooler deck. It was mid afternoon and the ship was two days late sailing, which apparently was customary. She stood at the rail looking down at the gangplank as the last of the passengers came aboard. They were mostly Indians, poorly dressed, many of them carrying fibre suitcases and bundles wrapped in brightly coloured cloth. She watched as they jostled and argued for position on the afterdeck, quickly spreading their possessions to stake out territory. Here and there were whole families ranging from grandmothers to infants. As soon as they settled they opened baskets and began distributing food. They did not look

unsatisfied and she wondered at their stoicism in enduring a three thousand mile journey in such conditions.

Her attention was drawn again to the gangplank A very tall, very blond young man was coming up, lightly balancing a canvas duffle bag on one shoulder. He was dressed in faded denim jeans and a tee shirt and on his feet were highly polished cowboy boots. They did not look incongruous. She had seen him earlier in the Customs shed and they had exchanged glances. He had bright blue eyes contrasting vividly with blond hair and a tanned face - a face at once strong yet vulnerable.

He reached the top of the gangplank and lifted his head, and again she was looking into those eyes. They held her for a moment then he nodded slightly and moved forward out of her sight. She turned from the rail and started walking the deck which surrounded the saloon, cabins and dining room. This deck was exclusively first class and as yet there were few other strollers. She passed a middle-aged Indian couple. He dressed in a conservative business suit, she in an orange sari, bare at the midriff. Then an elderly European man in a safari suit, who nodded at her pleasantly. She guessed that she would spend many hours walking this deck during the coming days. It was the first time she had ever been on a ship and she was looking forward to the voyage with a mixture of interest and trepidation. She did not know if she would get sea-sick or could endure four days of what she had been warned would be indifferent curry for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

But she had noticed a change in herself during the past two weeks. In one sense she was still inexperienced, naïve and timid, constantly reaching back to the mental security of her past life. Familiar places, familiar faces, understood customs and behaviour. In another sense from inside her shell she had observed a new world and had not been overly frightened. She had seen poverty and dirt, travelled with dust in her throat and bathed in water with dead bugs floating in it. Slowly she had realised that despite a life of predictable routine she had the ability to adjust and adapt. Africa had done that. Africa and her new friends, the Godfreys.

She had stayed ten days with them and they were a good

introduction to East Africa; both enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the country. At the weekend they had all driven up country to Mikumi, a new game reserve, a hundred miles inland. They had slept in tents and travelled in a Land-Rover scores of miles each day. She had seen lions and elephants, impalas and hyenas.

On the second night it rained heavily and lions had come into the camp seeking shelter under the surrounding umbrella trees. The English game warden had chased them away with loud thunder flashes. The next day the Land-Rover got stuck in deep mud and they had to walk back five miles to the camp, past herds of buffalo and giraffe, and a solitary rhino which eyed them suspiciously. Only the warden carried a gun and later, back at the camp, he admitted having qualms about the rhino and explained how it is one of the few beasts of Africa that will charge unprovoked.

At night, lying alone on her canvas cot, Kirsty had listened to the night sounds of Africa: the constant hum and clatter of insects. The sharp cries of night birds, the intermittent coughing roar of a distant lion and the chilling, cynical laugh of the hyena. She had been a little frightened, especially when the lions had come into the camp, but the warden and the Godfreys and the African servants had all been so matter-of-fact about it that her fear soon disappeared. The mornings had been the best. The hot coffee at dawn, then an hour in the Land-Rover watching the sun light up the trees and rolling scrub. And the great herds of animals, the graceful, leaping impalas; slightly comical zebras; cantering giraffe with long aloof necks; a lone kudu, nervous and beautiful with majestic sprawling horns. The warden had been excited, for kudu were rare so far south. He had tried to edge closer while Howard took photographs, but the kudu lifted its nose, smelt the wind and bounded off into the bush.

The evenings too were magic. First the hot bath in a canvas tub letting the warmth ease legs pleasantly aching from unaccustomed exercise. Then cool drinks in the mess tent under hissing lanterns and dinner of guinea fowl, or yellow neck; or tangy gazelle chops; and the conversation: the anecdotes and lore of East Africa, its animals and its people.

Slowly New York and Larry and Irving Goldman had all receded in her mind. But Garret was ever present and her fascination and curiosity was constantly overlaid by impatience in having to wait to continue her quest.

She spent four more days in Dar es Salaam, meeting some of the Godfreys' friends and swimming a lot in Oyster Bay.

At a reception one evening she had a stroke of luck. She was introduced to an Indian businessman who had offices throughout East Africa. He was shortly to fly in his own light aircraft to Mombasa. He would be delighted to give her a lift. This saved her a tedious dog-leg journey back to Nairobi and then the railway to the coast.

She had left the Godfreys with regret and enormous gratitude, hugging all three at the airport and fighting back tears which finally came as the twin-engined Cessna lifted off.

She sat behind the pilot, next to the Indian and once she had composed herself he pointed out the features below. They passed directly over the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. They looked idyllic in a setting of blue seas and sandy beaches, palm-thatched houses and neat plantations. But the Indian spoke eloquently of the savagery and death which had occurred only months before, and how the present leaders were still persecuting the Arabs and forcing twelve-year-old Asian girls into marriage. It was revenge for a thousand years of slavery, a revenge that turned the revolutionaries into animals.

The journey had taken an hour and a half and in the latter stages the Indian had changed the subject and talked about the *State of Haryana*. He had travelled on it several times to visit family in Bombay. It was, he explained apologetically, not a very nice ship. The food was bad and monotonous. He gave her several tips. Take a good supply of bottled drinking water, plenty of biscuits and fruit and so on to eat in her cabin. Insect repellent to be liberally sprayed around the cabin and toilet paper because that often ran out or was stolen.

It should have made Kirsty nervous but she reasoned that having been separated from a lion by a strip of canvas only a few nights before, the thought of a few cockroaches was not going to bother her.

In Mombasa she got the news that the ship was delayed.

The Indian arranged for her to stay at a good hotel near the beach for a very low rate. He also invited her home for dinner but she politely declined. She felt the need to be alone for a while. She swam and went sightseeing and shopping, but in her impatience the time went slowly and it was a relief when the agent phoned and told her the ship would sail at six in the evening and she could board any time after three. Minutes later Howard had phoned from Dar es Salaam. He had heard from his contact in the Seychelles. As of that morning the *Jaloud* and Danny Lascelles were still at the Yacht Club.

Now, as she circled the deck, she decided that the *State of Haryana* was not as bad as she had envisaged. Certainly it was less than clean but it was much bigger than she had feared and the decks were spacious and she had the privacy of her own cabin.

The ship's horn sounded twice and she walked to the rail and watched as they swung in the gangway. She felt the deck throbbing under her feet and other passengers were at the rail, waving to friends on the quay below. The warps were cast off and she turned to see a small, black tug boat on the seaward side, its stern churning up a foam.

Slowly and with a belch of black smoke the *State of Haryana* eased away from the quay. Kirsty walked back towards the stern and stood watching the docks with their huge cargo cranes looking like the praying mantis insects she had recently seen in Mikumi. To the left an Arab dhow sailed past, its great lateen sail dwarfing the hull. A group of white-robed Arabs sat in a circle on the poop.

As the ship passed out through the harbour entrance Kirsty felt the deck lift slightly as it met the first swell rolling in from the Indian Ocean. She turned and headed for her cabin, deciding that the first thing she would unpack would be the Kwells sea-sickness pills.

In the passageway, as she was about to open her door, the door to the next cabin opened. The blond giant came out and looked momentarily startled to see her. Close up he was younger than she had first thought. He collected himself and muttered "Good evenin' ma'am," then turned and walked down towards the bar. She doubted that she had ever seen a

more masculine or handsome man. As she closed the door behind her she mused that he could not be a great deal older than her own son.

At first she was nervous at dinner. There was the ritual of the steward showing her to a table at which were already seated five strangers. There were the middle-aged Indian couple, whom she had seen earlier on deck; another younger couple, dark but caucasian. He small and wiry, she slender and attractive, with long black hair. The fifth was an Indian, about forty, wearing a white uniform. He stood up and pulled her chair out, saying, "Welcome, Mrs Haywood. I am First Officer Pandit Desai."

She sat down and he sat next to her and gestured across the table. "Mr and Mrs Muran, passengers to Bombay; Mr and Mrs Savy, passengers to Seychelles."

The next few minutes were mildly painful for her. She had thought that she would sit alone, but glancing around she noted that all the sixty odd passengers were grouped on tables of four, six and eight. Uniformed officers were sprinkled around. She saw the tall blond across the room sitting with the European in the safari suit and two young Indian men. The passengers were predominantly Indian, with a scattering of European and African faces.

Slowly conversation picked up. It turned out that Mr Muran was an accountant from Nairobi. He and his wife were returning to India for the marriage of their eldest son. They were polite but reticent. The Savys were Seychellois of French extraction. They had been in Kenya on holiday. She learned that they owned and lived on Bird Island, sixty miles north of Mahé. It was only two miles square but had a vast colony of sea birds – sooty terns. They lived alone apart from half a dozen plantation workers who picked coconuts for copra. But they were planning to open a small hotel both for bird-lovers and fishermen. The waters around the island were teeming with tuna, wahoo, marlin, sailfish and many others. She liked them. He introduced himself as Guy and his wife as Marie-France.

The food arrived, a variety of dishes, all curried. She only picked at it; although the sea was calm she was wary of sea-sickness.

Throughout the meal Desai paid her close attention. He was tall and heavy-set in a tight fitting uniform. He affected a black moustache which he constantly stroked with a thumb nail. He asked her the purpose of her trip and, after hesitating, she replied that she was going on holiday.

After dinner they moved to the saloon, Kirsty being obsequiously escorted by Desai. There was a bar in the corner and groupings of chairs around coffee tables. The Murans had gone to their cabin, leaving the four of them. They had just sat down when the Englishman in the safari suit approached with the tall blond in tow. He greeted the Savys warmly and said:

"A pleasure. I didn't know you were on board. Guy, I'd like you to meet Alistair Cady. He's on his way to the Seychelles to do some game fishing . . he wants a sailfish . . I told him you were the man to talk to."

The Englishman's name was John Stevens and he signalled the bartender, who came over – a hulking Indian dressed in khaki shorts and a dirty tee shirt. After he had taken their orders and shambled off Stevens said to Desai:

"Pity you can't do something about that."

Desai shrugged and explained to Kirsty.

"We lease out the bar for every round trip. It makes it easier because if we put our own staff in they cheat like hell . . . and get drunk half the time."

The talk turned to fishing. Stevens, a tea-planter on Mahé, was very keen and knowledgeable and so was Guy Savy. From the conversation it appeared that Cady had only recently tried it off the coast of Kenya and become addicted. He had been told of the spectacular Seychelles fishing and a day later caught the ship, thankful for its delay. As Stevens and Guy exchanged anecdotes he listened avidly, but every so often his blue eyes would glance at Kirsty. She found it disconcerting and finally had to make a conscious effort not to look at him. Meanwhile Desai, sitting close behind her, was talking to her about ships and the problems of officers being away from home for so long and how pleasant it was to have nice passengers on a voyage. Every once in a while he patted her arm and moved his leg to brush hers, which was trapped against the table leg. He smelt of cheap deodorant and hair oil.

The drinks came and were consumed and Guy ordered another round. Then, in a half whisper, Desai informed her that he would have to make his rounds and check that everything was in order. He implied that the Captain was mildly incompetent. Later would she like to have a look around the ship?

She demurred. She was tired and would be going to bed soon. Perhaps some other time

He was not deterred. He would check back with her later to see if she was still about.

She glanced at Cady and saw him watching them. With Desai gone the atmosphere lightened. Marie-France talked to Kirsty about the islands and their history and creole cooking. In the morning she would talk to the chief steward and rearrange the seating pattern so they joined Cady and Stevens, then she would try to get into the galley and bribe the chef and cook a couple of meals herself for their table. Anything for a change.

Kirsty laughed and found herself relaxing. She decided it was time that she bought a round and she caught the bartender's eye and signalled. They were the only ones left in the saloon and he gave her a sour look, but he mixed the drinks. When he brought them over Cady looked up in surprise and then tried to pay for them, but Kirsty insisted and counted out the money.

Fifteen minutes later Cady, determined to get in his round, called out good-naturedly, "Hey ol' buddy. Circle the wagon here willya?"

Kirsty started to protest and so did Marie-France but their voices were stilled by a rumble from the bar. They looked up to see a rusty metal grill slam down on to the counter. From behind it the bartender said belligerently:

"Bar's closed!"

Silence, then Cady looked at his watch. "Hell man, it's only ten forty. Bar's s'posed to close at eleven."

The bartender had his hands flat in front of him. He leaned forward until his nose was almost touching the grill. Looking directly at Cady he said:

"Bar closes when I say."

Silence, then Cady stood up, an ever-darkening shadow

clouding his young face. Very slowly he walked to the bar. With each step the heels of his cowboy boots thumped the deck ominously. He reached the grill and looked down and through it. The bartender, although not short, had to crane his neck. Their faces were a foot apart.

Cady spoke very quietly, almost casually but every word sounded like a gun being cocked.

"Tell you a story my friend. This ol' farmer had a mule which he sold to his neighbour for a hunnerd dollars. Told 'im it was a good ol' mule . . . do anythin'. Next day the neighbour complained that the mule wouldn't move . . wouldn't budge. Farmer, he goes over there an' sure enough that ol' mule was standin' like a frozen rock. Farmer he picks up a piece of two by four . . . big piece of wood. He stands back an' wacks that old mule right between the eyes . . . then he says 'move!' That ol' mule moved right along. Farmer turns to his neighbour and says: tol' you he was a good ol' mule . . . do whatever you tell him . . . but first you gotta catch his attention."

His nose moved an inch closer, his fingers gripped the grill and his voice dropped a decibel.

"Now ol' buddy. If I have to catch your attention this bitty piece of chicken wire ain't gonna help you none."

A long silence while the bartender looked up into the narrow eyes. Slowly he wiped his palms down his tee shirt, then he murmured.

"That was three beers, two gin tonics and a vermouth Sir?"

8

As Kirsty undressed she was happy and a little drunk. She could not remember when she had last drunk too much. Three more rounds had followed the re-opening of the bar. The incident had not marred the atmosphere. Cady had shrugged it off as nothing and the bartender had taken it surprisingly well. Even accepting a drink as well, and keeping open well past eleven. She had found the Savys easy to talk to. They had been married only a year. Both came from old French colonial families. Marie-France explained that the British in the nineteenth century intercepted many slave trading vessels between Zanzibar and Arabia. The slaves were set free in the Seychelles. Inter-marriage and cohabitation with the original French settlers and the freed slaves created a multiracial society. It was not unusual for a blond boy to have a black cousin and be quite content with it. Those families who remained permanently white were referred to as '*Grand blancs*'. Although the British had taken over the islands in 1815 they were too small to bother much with, so for the next thirty years they left the French Governor in charge. Hence the language and food were creole, and Bastille day was still celebrated with more fervour than the Queen's birthday.

Stevens was a bit dry at first, but also relaxed with the drink. He had a big tea plantation high up in the Mahé mountains. He invited Kirsty to visit him and stay a weekend if she liked, adding with a twinkle that his wife would be in residence. Later he had asked Cady how it was possible for so young a man to take such a long holiday. Was he from a wealthy family? Cady shook his head and grinned and explained about his work in the oilfields and accumulating months of pay, and then losing his job.

"How?" Stevens asked.

Cady had smiled slightly and said "I drew my boss's attention to the fact that he was a liar."

Cady had not talked much to Kirsty. He seemed a little shy of her.

She slipped on her nightdress and peered out of the porthole. She could see the reflection of the ship's lights on the water and the waves created by the ship's bows. It was calm and, except for the throb of the ship's engine and the swish of water, very quiet. She poured herself a glass of bottled water and drank deeply. Kevin always used to say that two pints of water before going to bed prevented a bad hangover. She decided that she liked travelling by sea. The small cabin was cosy and now clean. The steward had made up the lower bunk, and the sheet was neatly turned down.

She drained the glass and was about to get into the bunk when she heard the light tap on the door. Mystified, she crossed over and opened it a crack. Desai was standing in the passageway with an ingratiating smile. He said.

"I saw your light was still on. Would you like to see round the ship now?"

"Now? But it's almost midnight."

"Yes, it's very quiet . . . the best time."

She shook her head vigorously. "Thank you, no. I'm very tired. Maybe some other time."

Casually he put his hand against the door and asked "Is your cabin all right? Sometimes those lazy stewards leave them very dirty . . . let me see."

She retreated a bit. "It's very clean, don't worry."

He was in the doorway now.

"I like you very much, Mrs Haywood. Your name is Kirsty, isn't it? Can I call you Kirsty?"

"Sure . . . but I want to go to bed now."

He smiled widely. Teeth gleaming under his black moustache.

"Sure . . . sure. But we don't have much time. Only three nights. I know you like me, I can always tell."

He was inside the cabin now, pushing the door shut with his heel. His hands came up behind and flicked the lock. She felt her heart begin to beat faster

"Listen Mr Desai. You've got the wrong idea. I don't want to sleep with you."

His smile widened to a grin and he gripped her arm as she backed into a corner. "Sure you do. I know you American women. There was one aboard two months ago to Bombay. She said 'no no no' for three nights then 'yes yes yes' for the next two weeks . . . but we don't have that much time."

She could not believe it was happening. For the first night in years she had been relaxed and laughing and now in seconds it had turned into a nightmare. She looked up at his fixed grin, the sweat on his face and the lust in his eyes. In a panic she swung her free hand at his face, but he caught her wrist easily and pulled her against him and laughed.

"Sure; fight lady. I like it. But when my cock's inside you then go quiet."

She brought her knee up, but he turned his thigh and it bounced off. With rising desperation she realised that in spite of his paunch he was immensely strong and fast. He swung her round, gripped both her wrists in one hand and, with the other, ripped down her nightdress. His hand gripped her right breast and squeezed painfully. She sucked in air to scream but his hand left her breast and clamped over her mouth. She tried to bite it, but in a blur of movement he took it away and then smashed it against the side of her face. Half stunned, she felt herself lifted and tossed on to the bunk. Felt the air on her legs as he pulled up her nightdress; felt his hand ramming up between her thighs, fingers groping crudely. His weight came down on her, the stubble of his cheek scraping hers; his tongue licking her mouth. She twisted and struggled, moaning in terror, felt a finger squeezing inside her. His other hand was back mauling her breasts, nails digging deep. It was the pain that finally cleared the mists of terror. He was too strong. She had to use her brains. She turned her head and whispered:

"Wait. Please wait. OK. Don't hurt me. Whatever you want. Please Mr Desai. It's OK. But let's do it slowly. You're so heavy."

He chuckled and eased his weight off her, looking down at her face in triumph, then at her heavy breasts, red from his

gouging fingers. She tried to force a smile and waved a hand at her torn nightdress.

"Let me get this off."

He grinned and panted and pulled away. She swung her feet to the floor, drew air in deeply, measuring the distance to the cabin wall. She reached for the hem of the nightdress, forced another smile, then launched herself forward, pounded her fists against the wall and screamed piercingly. A second later the back of Desai's hand smashed across her mouth, sending her spinning into the corner.

She blacked out for a few seconds and when she came round it was Cady's voice she first heard shouting her name accompanied by the rattling of the door She opened her eyes. She was looking up through Desai's straddled legs She heard a splintering and the door was open and Cady, wearing only a sort of cloth around his waist, was coming in, vivid blue eyes sweeping the scene and then suffusing with rage. She crawled under the bunk hearing Desai's panic-stricken voice:

"She invited me . . ."

"Bullshit!"

Then a thud like wood hitting wood and she twisted and saw him bouncing off the wall.

He tried to fight back, throwing a roundhouse right, but Cady ducked under it, moved in close and his elbows pumped as his huge fists smashed in, his breath spurting in rage and effort.

Desai sank to his knees, trying to grip Cady's legs, but Cady caught a handful of his greasy hair, pulled him clear and smashed his knee into his face

Then crew members were crowding into the cabin and pulling them apart, and the Captain arrived, buttoning his shirt and demanding to know what was going on.

It took half an hour for the turmoil to die down. Desai was carried to his cabin, and the Captain listened sympathetically to Kirsty's story and then sighed.

It was very regrettable. There had been complaints in the past. Unfortunately Desai's father was a high official in the Steamship Company of India Nevertheless, this time the Captain would be firm. Desai would be confined to his cabin

until the ship reached Bombay and a report would be made. He would take a statement from Kirsty but suggested that she did not file charges. Such things were so complicated at sea, especially when it was one word against the other. Anyway, she had not been physically harmed. Kirsty agreed and, with more apologies, the Captain departed, leaving her alone with Cady She sat by the table and he stood near the door watching her with concern. She was looking down at the table drawing a pattern on it with a finger.

She said, "It's ironic. I spent a lifetime in New York and never got attacked. I have to come ten thousand miles for it to happen." She looked up and smiled wanly.

"Bastards like that," he said, "you'll find everywhere."

She nodded in an abstract way and said "Do you always sleep in that?"

He looked down at his vividly coloured sarong. "Yeah. I did a year on a wild-catter in Indonesia a while back. Everyone out there sleeps in them . . . they're comfortable . . . I got the habit . . . I should go . . . let you sleep."

She nodded. "What's it like . . Indonesia?"

He started to tell her about that teeming archipelago, of its forests and ancient temples and diverse peoples, but he noticed that she was not really listening and he realised that she had started the conversation because she did not want to be alone Abruptly he said, "Kirsty, an experience like that would make anyone nervous, specially at night and in a strange situation." He gestured at the spare bunk. "Would you like me to stay here tonight? Be sure I won't bother you."

He saw her face brighten perceptibly. "I know you won't bother me. Would you mind? It's silly, but . . ."

"Sure. No problem. If you make up the bunk I'll go get a shirt and some pants for the morning."

Twenty minutes later she was looking up at one of his big feet sticking out over the edge of the top bunk.

"Are you OK Cady? These bunks were made for smaller people."

"Sure. I'm used to it."

"Isn't Alistair a Scottish name?"

"Sure. Lots of Nova Scotians have Scottish blood . . . but I hate the name. Just call me Cady Everybody does."

"How tall are you?"

"Six four."

"With or without the boots?"

She heard him chuckle. "Without I know it's crazy but just about all the oil guys wear them. An' dress an' talk like cowboys . . even Canucks It's because most of the guys are Texans or pretend to be. It's like a closed fraternity, you kind of conform."

"Do you like the life? Will you go back to it?"

"Oh sure. The pay's good and you get plenty of time off."

He yawned and she reached out and switched off her light.

"Goodnight Cady."

"'Night Kirsty."

The cabin was in semi darkness In the light filtering through the porthole she could still just make out his foot. It was a comfortable darkness.

She turned over and snuggled down prepared for sleep; but ten minutes later she was still wide awake. The young man lying four feet above her was an enigma. She rolled on to her back and looked at the foot again. She sensed that he too was awake. Softly she called.

"Cady?"

"Yeah?"

"You have any family?"

"Only a married sister back in Nova Scotia . . . My mum died when I was a kid . . and my Pa was killed in an auto accident . . . Oh, 'bout eight years ago "

"No special girl?"

There was a pause, then: "No. Never has been . not really."

She was puzzled. "A good looking young man like you . . . ?"

There was a long silence and for a moment she wondered if she had said something wrong. Then he started talking Perhaps it was the intimate darkness allowing him to talk without her seeing his face Perhaps because she was a good deal older than him – and a woman. Perhaps it was because

it was just the right time. The words came out in a quiet but constant flood tinged with bitterness.

"Sure . . . a good lookin' guy like me. You know what happens? Every woman looks at you like you're a stud . . . 'Cady the stud'. I know it happens the other way. A beautiful woman is a sex object. But let me tell you it's a different thing for a man and in a vicious kinda way. A guy like me usually attracts those women who want a sexual kick. You're expected to perform . . . expected, dammit! And because you're six four, blue-eyed, blond and a bit tough with it you'd better perform better than some guy half a foot shorter with brown eyes and mousy hair. If not you're a great damned disappointment! Kirsty, a guy like me is on trial every time he looks at a woman. OK, sure . . . the same question could apply to a woman . . . would you rather be ugly? No. But for a woman it's different. She can lie back and accept it and if it's no good she can fake it and then the guy is satisfied. But a potential stud – he can't fake it. He's gotta perform and if he doesn't he gets the questions: 'What's the matter honey? Too much to drink? You're tired honey? You don't find me attractive honey?' . . . They make it worse with movies and books. The hero is always tall and handsome. Hell, Alan Ladd is only five foot nothin' and they always made the heroine stand in a hole to kiss him! I never read a book where the romantic lead was short, bald and maybe even a little bitty round shouldered . . . so it's natural: women expect guys who look like me to be super fantastic lovers . . ."

Her voice came quietly. "And you're not?"

"Hell no . . . I don't know what kind of lover I am. Maybe lousy. I'm sure as hell not what a lot of them expect."

"You're not impotent?"

He laughed bitterly. "Sometimes sure. When I see the expectation in a woman's eyes . . . when it's obvious . . . when she looks at you like a fresh baked doughnut . . . sure, can't even get an erection! Guys I work with, they'll spend a month or two in the desert without a woman in sight. Spend ninety per cent of the time just talkin' 'bout women. Then when they hit town a-rarin' to go they find they can't even get it up . . . Sorry to be crude."

"It's OK. I never realised You talk about it with each other?"

"Almost never. Only with real close friends But it's why you often find young oil guys with older women. They understand better."

"Oh."

"Hey wait a minute . . I didn't mean . . . you know."

She saw the shape of his head appear over the edge of the bunk.

"No Cady, I understand. I guess I'm surprised. It's not the image I had, that's all."

The head disappeared. She heard him say bitterly, "Exactly. Not the image. Listen, I was on leave one time in Cyprus with a couple of friends. We were in a nightclub in Limassol. It was three in the morning and we had to get up to Platres in the mountains. 'Bout twenty miles and our car was busted. Know what those guys did?"

"What?"

"While I was in the can they auctioned me off ! There were plenty of tourist girls there, some with rented cars. Those guys went round and told those girls that whoever drove us up to Platres could sleep with me. Several offered. Those bastards chose the one with the biggest car . . it was a Ford Cortina . . . blue." He could hear her trying to stifle her laughter. "Dammit Kirsty, they didn't even tell me till we were up there and she was climbing out of the car lickin' her lips."

"So what happened?"

"I told her no way . she got real mad. Big German girl . . . called me a cheat an' a faggot . . had to give her five pounds for the goddam petrol!"

She could not stifle her laugh and she heard an answering one from above and he muttered.

"Sons of bitches auctioned me off for a ride home . anyway that's enough about me. Any more and I'll think I need a goddam shrink!"

The bunk squeaked as he turned over and pounded the pillow.

Another ten minutes passed. The ship was rolling slightly and that, together with the sound of the sea swishing

alongside, should have lulled her to sleep. But she was wide awake. She decided that Cady was one complicated character and guessed that the early death of his mother may have been a contributing factor. Just as the death of Kevin had affected Garret.

The bunk above squeaked again and then she heard his low voice.

"Kirsty. You awake?"

"Uh huh."

"What about you? You're married?"

"I was. Ten years ago my husband fell off a mountain."

"A mountain?"

"Yes. It was his hobby . . . rock-climbing. Always alone. He was good at it but one day I guess he made a mistake and fell two thousand feet."

"Jeez! Any children?"

"One, a son . . . Garret."

"Where's he? Back in New York?"

She did not answer. She was trying to decide whether to tell him. Lately she had developed an aversion to talking about it.

"Kirsty, you OK?"

She decided. She would talk about it and more.

"Cady, I'm not on holiday. I'm looking for my son They say he's dead but I don't believe it."

Again maybe it was the semi darkness and the lack of eye contact which started her off. First she told him about the visit by Captain Buckley and all that had followed. Then she went further back to the time after Kevin's death. His estate had totalled only $15,000 Half of it to Kirsty and half to Garret when he reached his eighteenth birthday. Her half had gone as a deposit for the apartment. His was invested.

At this point Cady had clicked on the light and clambered down and sat on the chair with his long legs propped on her bunk. He poured her a glass of water and one for himself and watched her intently as she continued.

She told him about Garret. He was a difficult child, even before Kevin's death, but afterwards doubly so. He worshipped his father and took after him. He had a fiercely independent streak and resisted authority of any kind. There

was another problem. He had an extremely rare blood group. It was calculated that less than one in a million people had it. So it had made her more than ever protective of him. If he was badly injured and needed a transfusion he could be in great danger. At all times he had to wear a brass disc round his neck stamped with his blood group.

Looking back she knew she had been over protective and cloying but he was all she had, and she loved him to the exclusion of everything else. As he grew up so his resentment grew. She forbade him to play contact sports like football or basketball. She would not let him go to summer camp in case of an accident. If he was even a few minutes late coming home from school she flew into a panic. In short she smothered him, as she had later realised with stunning clarity, and he had reacted accordingly. They had terrible rows as he grew into and then past puberty. He started to threaten that as soon as he reached eighteen and received his inheritance he would leave home and never come back.

The memory twisted her face and her monologue stopped. After a couple of minutes Cady gently asked.

"What happened?"

She was rubbing her hands together, as though washing them. She looked up at him.

"Of course I didn't believe it. What mother would? It's what children always say." She drew a breath and coughed and suddenly she was crying. She pulled her knees up and rested her forehead on them. Cady remained still. He felt like he was a catalyst in collusion with a catharsis. After a while she lifted her head and wiped a hand across her eyes.

"Cady, that was my mistake. He was almost eighteen and I treated him like a child." Her voice rose. "A goddam child! He was a man and knew it and felt it. God, when I think now! What he went through. Lost his father when he really was a child. Had to face the prospect of being a medical freak . . . and did face up to it . . . like a man. Like his father would have. And a mother who treated him like an invalid infant!"

She lowered her head again to her knees. There was a long silence, then Cady said,

"So, Kirsty, you committed the crime of lovin' him too much. You can't penalise yourself for that. You gotta

understand somethin' . . . Love can't be measured out. Specially a mother's love. Specially after what happened to your husband You just did what you thought was right."

She snorted. "What I did was drive him away."

"So what happened?"

She raised her head again; her eyes were clear of tears but clouded with memory.

"Oh, we had one final flaming row a month before his birthday. I forget what about. After that he hardly left his room. He played records – mostly the Beatles hits . . . God how I hated the Beatles!" She smiled wanly at the association then her face turned serious again.

"Then on the morning of his eighteenth birthday he started packing his case . . . I just didn't believe it. I stood in the doorway watching. Asked him what he was doing. Where he was going. He wouldn't talk to me . . . wouldn't even look at me. I was a stranger . . . No, not even that. I was someone he hated. Maybe like a prisoner hates a warder."

"You couldn't stop him?"

There was nothing she could do The money was legally his, and with interest had grown to over $10,000. He was going to India. He would go and seek the truth.

He went and she was left with tears and a guilt growing like cancer inside her. She heard nothing for four months and then a letter came postmarked Delhi. It was short but not unfriendly. He was all right and she should not worry.

She did, until the next one came six weeks later from Hyderabad. It was a little longer. Another month of worry until the next letter from Bangalore – again a little longer. On a map she followed his progress south through the Indian subcontinent. She could not reply. There was never a return address. Finally the letter had arrived from Sri Lanka. The long letter telling her that he was coming home, that he understood things better. Above all that he loved her.

She had started crying again, but not sobbing, and her voice remained clear. On instinct Cady moved and sat next to her and took her hand in his. She rested her shoulder against him. Her voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"Cady, have you ever had moments in your life? Moments

of such joy that it feels like the world began? Like the first time the sun rose in a million years?"

He squeezed her hand; saw the tears still forming and sliding down over her high cheekbones.

"Cady, I had that feeling three times. First when I married. I was a virgin. Don't laugh . . . very old-fashioned. I adored Kevin but I was terrified. My mother was dead already and my father too shy to tell me anything. What little I had heard sounded really sordid. The petting I had done as a teenager felt sordid. Guess I went along with it just to conform. I was terrified. We went up to a little hotel in the mountains for our honeymoon. Cady, know what I was doing when I lost my virginity?"

Intrigued, he looked down into her wet eyes. "What?"

"Laughing! I was laughing. Kevin knew and understood. It took hours. He took away every sordid thought I ever had and it was beautiful The second moment was when Garret was born. Kevin with me. Husbands didn't do that in those days. The doctor was appalled, but Kevin insisted . threatening to break up the hospital. It was hard . He was a big baby."

She looked down at Cady's hand twisted in her own

"Ten hours and Kevin held my hand right through it. Put Garret into my arms." Her whispered voice dropped away at the memory. She kept twisting Cady's hand in hers Then: "And the third moment – when I got Garret's letter from Ceylon. I was right at the bottom, Cady, living a lie. Trapped in tedium. That letter started the world again All the guilt was stripped away. My son loved me Was coming home The days that followed I never let that letter more than a yard away from me I read it before I slept at night and when I woke in the morning."

Now she was gripping his hand, surprising him with her strength.

"Cady, I was free, the guilt was gone. That was the moment of all moments."

And then Captain Buckley and the guilt being clamped on again. It was her fault, she had driven her son out to his death.

She was talking through sobs now. Cady remained

motionless, his eyes never leaving her face as she spoke of the sudden, positive belief that Garret was alive and that nothing in the world mattered except that she find him.

She had talked for hours and when she finished he stood up and looked out of the porthole at the lightening sky.

She watched his face: brooding eyes half-closed in thought, long blond hair parted in the middle and falling back behind his ears like sheaves of straw. He turned his head and gave her a half smile.

"Let's go on deck and watch the dawn."

"You don't think I'm mad?"

"I think what you're doing is the most wonderful goddam thing I ever heard. As of now you've got an assistant. When you talk to that bastard Lascelles I'll be right next to you."

"What about the sailfish?"

He smiled. "Kirsty, forgive me, but fuck the goddam sailfish!"

9

"But Mr Patel, she is not your responsibility," the lawyer said.

Ramesh shrugged "I feel responsible."

"Why? She admits to being a stowaway "

Ramesh sighed. It was difficult to explain It was not that the girl was vulnerable. She had a toughness in some ways stronger than his. What disconcerted him was her fatalistic acceptance of what would happen to her Although she was a stowaway she had, in a sense, entrusted herself to him.

He remembered his astonishment when, on the second day out from the Maldives, running before a steady force three, he had opened the chain locker to store an empty jerry can. Small as she was she still filled that space, crouched uncomfortably on the coils of anchor chain, her black almond eyes looking up at him in a mixture of defiance and trepidation.

Later, drinking a cold beer in the saloon and between mouthfuls of stew she explained her actions quite simply She had been looking for an opportunity to get away for months She told him of her life in the Maldives; about the increasing attentions of her cousin's husband, of the lack of any future; the insignificance of the people She had decided that Ramesh was a kind man and would not abuse her. He was travelling far and maybe somewhere on his route she would find a place to live and make a future She would not be a passenger She had a little money saved – not much, but she could pay for her food. Also she would cook for him and wash his clothes and keep the boat clean. He could teach her a little and then she could take her turn on watch.

It was eminently sensible but he was profoundly fearful of the prospect. He was an inherently shy man and one who had never had to shoulder responsibility for another. Now he was

presented with the inevitability of living in close proximity to what was a very beautiful young girl. In addition he was responsible for her very life.

He explained all this to her. It was one thing to brave the elements foolishly with only his own life at stake. Something again when another was involved.

She had brushed this aside. She knew the dangers. That day in the store he had talked at length about his inexperience. As to the other matter he need not worry.

She had utterly shocked him by saying that although a virgin she had accepted the possibility that he might wish to sleep with her. So be it. He was taking her away from a life she hated, albeit reluctantly, and if he insisted she would submit to him. She trusted him – he was a kind man.

He had been dumbfounded and highly embarrassed and assured her sternly that no such thing would ever happen. It was impossible. Her honour would never be even remotely threatened, and so on and so forth.

At that point he thought he noticed a vague twinkle in her eye. Perhaps she was well aware that this man was incapable of forcing unwanted attention on anyone.

He had considered turning back to the Maldives, but they had already covered nearly four hundred miles and with the monsoon dead on the nose it would have been a long and uncomfortable journey. He also doubted he had the resolution to return the girl to a life she hated.

So it was a fait accompli. The first thing she did was clean out the chain locker. She had been sick in the confined space during the first night. Also she had brought fruit with her. Bananas and papaya and oranges for the juice. The peels were in a neat pile in the corner. It made him realise the extent of her courage and determination. It must have been hell cooped up in the tiny hole without light and with the boat pitching and rolling. Later she had washed his dirty clothes and then while he sat at the helm and watched his much-mended underpants flapping from the boom, she cleaned the inside of the boat from end to end.

Within two days a routine had been established. He taught her to read a compass and steer a course, and she stood watch for four hours up to midnight while he slept and then again at

dawn. She produced all the meals, working minor miracles with sparse and unexciting ingredients. She kept the interior spotlessly clean and he took responsibility for everything on deck. She was unobtrusive, sensing when he did not want to talk. After a while he realised that it was the best of both worlds. He had, or very nearly, the peace and solitude of the single-handed sailor and yet company and conversation when he wanted it.

For the next ten days they sailed steadily south-west seeing nothing but flying fish and dolphins. It was idyllic and they slowly came to know each other and the bare details of each other's lives. He felt the bond slowly uniting them; sensed the growing respect and affection she felt for him. The way she watched while he took his dawn and noon sights and plotted their position on the chart. She was in awe of such skills, not realising that sometimes the triangle covered by such sightings could contain an area of several hundred square miles; or that if there was cloud cover for more than a day or two Ramesh would have to rely on dead reckoning from the old log line spinning behind the stern. She did notice his agitation when that disappeared one morning, presumably taken in mistake by a shark. After that Ramesh spent a long time reading his tattered 'bible' and then coopted her help. She threw bits of cardboard into the water at right angles to the bow. He stood at the stern with a stop-watch calculating how long they took to reach the end of the boat.

This procedure was repeated several times a day and Ramesh would then cover a sheet of paper with calculations and then with a positive air note the boat's speed into the log.

Lani was mightily impressed, but then she did not see Ramesh every morning offering up a prayer that the sky would remain clear until they spotted the peak of Mahé Island.

As Ramesh noted Lani's increasing affection he assiduously tried to promote within himself a paternal or at best avuncular reaction. To an extent he succeeded but on occasions he mentally had to reprimand himself. With the wind astern it got very hot below decks and Lani would often come up in a pair of wispy pants and a bra – she owned no bikini – and

switch on the seawater pump and hose herself down on the foredeck.

At the helm Ramesh would gaze studiously out to sea, but with a veritable life of their own his eyeballs would constantly swivel to the lithe figure writhing under the stream of water. Afterwards it was worse. She would come and sit next to him in the cockpit and chat for a few minutes. He decided that no artist could paint such an exquisite picture Beads of water shimmering on her smooth brown skin; long strands of wet hair coiled up and held on to her head by a single pin; the small oval face supported by a neck graceful enough to turn a swan green with envy; and when those rebellious eyeballs had tugged his gaze lower, the twin slopes of small, perfect breasts, with the hard dark button nipples showing through her wet bra.

Ramesh would feel his heart beating faster and when she had gone below he would quickly concentrate his mind on such things as chicken tandoori, or when the oil filters on the engine should next be changed.

There were nights when the wind was gentle but steady and after dinner they would sit on the afterdeck while the self-steering gear kept *Manasa* easily on course.

Neither felt the obligation of conversation. The long silences were never stifling.

But sometimes they did talk. Ramesh remembered one such evening. *Manasa* was moving at barely two knots. Without any sense of urgency Ramesh never considered turning on the engine.

It had been dark, with no moon; the only light coming from stars and the faint glow from the navigation lights.

After clearing the dinner plates Lani came back on deck and settled herself into a canvas chair. For half an hour there was silence apart from the quiet wash of the bow wave, and the occasional creak of rigging. Then she asked:

"Were you ever married Ramesh?"

"No."

A few minutes passed, then:

"Ever in love?"

"Once . . . about ten years ago."

She was sitting only two yards away, but he could only

make out the outline of her face – no details. He waited for another question but none came.

Then he found himself talking about it. About the way it had affected him, abruptly altered his view of life Given it meaning and purpose Somehow lightened corners that before had always been murky He talked of the thrill of making plans; when before, only predictable routine had ruled his life Then the numbing shock when, under pressure from her parents, she had told him that they had no future together.

"Then she did not love you," Lani had remarked. "If she truly loved you, nothing would have stopped her "

After a moment's thought Ramesh conceded the possibility but pointed out that in India the strata of the society was rigid, especially for women.

"I know," Lani answered bitterly "It was like that for me."

She told him a little of her life in Sumatra. Her family were wealthy traders and she had been given a good early education. But as she began to think for herself and use her new knowledge the barriers came down. The Chinese in Indonesia, and most other South East Asian countries, maintained their customs and cultures with rigid determination Under pressure from the Government many Chinese families adopted Indonesian names, and made other cosmetic adjustments. But they remained Chinese, in their thinking, in their tastes and in their prejudices. At school she had met an Indonesian boy and liked him. One day her eldest brother had seen them together after school drinking coffee at a street stall.

Her father had beaten her. It was not the pain that lingered but the rage in his eyes. The thought that Lani had brought shame on him by associating with someone racially inferior.

Immediately Ramesh had felt a mental bond. He told her of his early childhood The many humiliations because he was neither British nor Indian. Both looked down on him Mentally it was like living on a suspension bridge over a torrent. There was hostility, ridicule and scorn from both banks. It was life in limbo.

He had told her how he developed an attitude turning in on himself. Creating his own impression of what he was. His

own interpretation of right and wrong; and what was important - or otherwise. He judged people only by their attitude to him. It made for few friends.

"So you were lonely?" she asked in the darkness.

"In some ways no. I found companions in books. In other ways yes. I had few friends . . . really only two. My mother and one other. There was not much laughter. Life was working – and, well . . . living every day in the same way – only the books took me over the horizon."

He told her about the statuette and how it had enabled him to buy *Manasa*.

"How," she had asked, "did you come to do it . . . and why?"

Without hesitation he said "The 'how' was extremely easy. No one else wanted poor *Manasa*. She sort of beckoned to me. The 'why' is something about which I am not sure. I think I was running away from loneliness."

"But you went alone."

"Yes. But escaped the loneliness of routine . . . of measuring time in minutes . . . the loneliness of a donkey circling a water well."

"And what do you look for?"

He had chuckled. "Lani. I think I look for people. For people who will see me with fresh eyes."

She thought about that and then said: "Ramesh, it is strange. In ways we are the same and in others different. You wish to present yourself as you are – and not how prejudice paints you. So you move out in the world for people to look in at you. For me, I don't care what they see. I only want to look out."

He saw the truth in it. He was sailing out to prove himself – to himself and the world – whatever that was. She came from generations of instilled racial pride – and cared nothing for it Had nothing to prove; wanted only to discover not a new life, but her first one.

He had felt stimulated by the conversation and appreciated the girl's intelligence. He had never talked that way to anyone.

She had the same feelings and, embraced by the darkness, they both felt an affinity.

It was the engine which eventually brought the idyll to an

end. About two hundred miles from Mahé the monsoon dropped away until the sails flapped forlornly. No matter Together with Lani he dropped and secured them and turned on the Perkins. For the rest of the day and most of the night the *Manasa* trundled along at a steady five knots. At around four in the morning Lani, asleep in the fo'c'sle, was wakened by a clattering noise followed by a loud bang She pulled on her shorts and made her way through the saloon to the engine room. Ramesh was already there looking with concern at the silent, smoking engine.

There was not much he could do until daylight and then he spent a puzzled half hour poking and pulling at it while Lani made breakfast.

They ate on deck under an awning which he had rigged over the boom while he explained to her his total inadequacy as an engineer. Back in Bombay Murjani, the engineer, had explained to him the rudiments and he was capable of very minor repairs and normal maintenance. However, what had happened to the Perkins he did not know and whatever had gone wrong was beyond him.

He was despondent but Lani cheered him up. They were only forty or fifty miles from Mahé. The wind would soon come up and in a day they would get there Meanwhile, in anticipation, they raised the sails which flapped forlornly

But the wind refused to co-operate and for five days they had drifted with the current. On the second day they could just make out the peak of Mahé on the horizon and then real frustration set in because each morning it appeared no closer.

For Ramesh it was a period of rising concern. Water was the main problem He had left the Maldives with ample for himself, but with his unexpected passenger they were now dangerously low. Lani was unconcerned, having total faith in Ramesh even though he was embarrassed about not knowing what was even wrong with the Perkins, let alone be able to fix it. She spent a lot of time successfully fishing, for the water was relatively shallow She caught a variety of fish while Ramesh tinkered with the engine with the frustration born of ignorance.

By the fifth day he had become desperate He noticed that they were drifting to the east If that continued they would

miss the islands; and then there was nothing for a thousand miles until Africa.

He cursed his stupidity for not investing in a radio transmitter. By trying to save his capital he had put his life at risk – and worse – that of Lani.

It was on this last day that Lani proved her worth. She was supremely confident that the wind would soon come up and see them safely into Mahé. She cooked him a delicious lunch and darned a couple of his shirts and chatted about what they would do when they arrived. In the face of such optimism his own spirits rose. Surely, he told himself, the lull could not last much longer and when the water ended they could squeeze liquid nourishment from the plentiful fish.

He had just joined Lani with a line in his hand when they spotted the boat heading towards them.

It was hard to explain all this to Rajaratnam, the lawyer, even though he was an Indian whose family had been settled on the Seychelles for over a century. During the days he had spent with Lani a bond had grown up which confused but warmed him. The thought of her being cooped up in a jail cell was painful.

"What will happen to her?"

Rajaratnam shrugged. He was a short, precise man with round spectacles, neatly dressed in a white shirt and dark tie.

"It's a bit complicated. Normally a stowaway is sent back from whence he or she came. She will not be allowed to stay and settle here. Any settler has to prove a sizeable income . . . and that she cannot do. Besides, she has no passport. It's a decision that will have to be taken by the Governor and he's down in the Amirante Islands until next week . . ."

"Meanwhile she has to stay in jail?"

The lawyer grimaced. "That's the procedure . . . but I'll try and do something . . . maybe they'll let her out under your guarantee, but you would have to post a bond."

"How much?"

"I don't know. It could be up to 10,000 local rupees. Do you have that much?"

Ramesh calculated in his head and then nodded.

"But what about your fee?"

The lawyer waved a hand negatively "Don't worry about it First we'll try and get her released to your custody, then take it from there."

"Thank you" Ramesh was about to get up when he remembered something. "By the way, could you recommend an engineer . . .? My engine . . ."

Rajaratnam pursed his lips and then tut-tutted to himself

"That's a problem There is one Charlie Marzzochi. He's an Italian and good, but he's in Mauritius on a job and will be away for weeks The Government mechanic is in jail . . . doing four months for stealing diesel . . I don't know of anyone else. This is a small place Is it serious?"

Ramesh nodded "I think so I know very little . . ."

The lawyer surveyed him for a few moments and Ramesh got the feeling that he totally disapproved of middle-aged *babus* sailing the seven seas But he was immediately proven wrong. Rajaratnam suddenly smiled and said:

"How crazy you are . . but what an adventure! If I didn't have a wife, mother in law, eight children and Lord knows how many other dependents, I'd do the same thing and to blazes with everything." He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the slowly turning ceiling fan. Then speaking in measured tones as though in court he said.

"First you have to diagnose how sick your engine is How old is it?"

"About forty years."

The lawyer winced and said "Spare parts are the big problem out here. Even for modern engines Anyway, first you have to find out what's wrong I suggest you talk to Jack Nelson. He's British. A retired colonial from Tanzania settled here now. He used to be an engineer in the Navy during the war."

"Ah that's good," Ramesh said in relief, but the lawyer held up his hand.

"There are two problems First that's what he says and he talks about it a lot given the chance He makes it sound as though he kept the entire British fleet steaming single-handed. Well since the war he's been building roads in East Africa and I doubt that he's seen a marine engine in years He strikes me as a talker more than a doer"

Ramesh's face turned doleful and Rajaratnam said, "Nevertheless, he might be able to diagnose the trouble. However, you would have to persuade him and that could be difficult!"

"Why? I would pay him of course . . . if it's not too much."

The lawyer smiled. "No, that's not the problem. Jack Nelson is a bit of a bigot. Like a lot of those old colonials, and some that we've still got working in Government here. I get on all right with him – I arranged the papers when he bought his bungalow. But curiously, being an Anglo-Indian, he will tend to look down on you more than he would me."

Ramesh smiled grimly. "I have come across such an attitude before. Perhaps they think we stain their racial purity."

Rajaratnam shrugged and looked at his watch "Mr Patel, I suggest you go down to the Yacht Club, where at this time Nelson will be propping up the bar. Try and get a little friendly with him. You might use the twin tactics of flattery and beer. He is susceptible to both. In the meantime I'll see what I can do about Miss Sutowo. Don't worry about her. Our prison is relatively comfortable and relaxed. I'll arrange for you to see her in the morning."

Ramesh thanked him and got up to go. At the door the lawyer's voice stopped him.

"If you do get friendly with Nelson you could mention her plight. He might be able to help."

"How?"

Rajaratnam spread his hands in a resigned gesture.

"The famed British old boy network. Black, our Commissioner of Police, is another ex-East African colonial – and a friend of Nelson's."

"I see." Ramesh looked thoughtful. "This could cost me a lot of beer."

The lawyer smiled. "Expensive beer. Nelson only drinks imported Heineken!"

From a wooden bench in the prison courtyard Lani watched the sun come up. It was too hot to sleep in the cell, with its one small window. She had been surprised to find that she was not locked in at night but the wardress had smiled and

explained that even if she escaped there was really nowhere for her to run to.

She was the only occupant in the women's section and had the courtyard to herself.

High on the ridge of a hill the prison looked down over Victoria, the capital, and the harbour and beyond it the small islands ringing the harbour. In the increasing light she could just make out the white hull of *Manasa* moored alongside the Yacht Club jetty, and for the first time she felt a sharp pang of self-pity. She decided that the days she had spent with Ramesh on that yacht were the happiest she had ever known. She had begun to realise that her prospects looked bleak. The British were a strict people and always abided by the rules. The wardress had told her that several people had been deported already that year – usually itinerant adventurers unable to support themselves and living off the generosity of the locals. The day before Ramesh had told her that he would find a lawyer and try to visit her in the morning. She wondered if he was awake yet. She guessed that in the heat he would probably be sleeping on deck. She strained her eyes but at that distance could not discern any particular form.

For the next half hour she tried to guess her future. Would they try to send her back? Would Ramesh manage to get his engine repaired and continue with his voyage? Would they let her go with him? Would he still want her?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a door opening and she turned to see the fat black wardress smiling and holding a tray.

"Breakfast young lady," she said in the lilting accent of the Seychellois. "You sleep good?"

She came over and put the tray next to Lani on the bench, clumped down beside and fanned herself with her hand.

"Day's barely started and hot enough to fry eggs without no cooker."

Lani looked down at the tray. There were two fried eggs and some limp bacon, a thick slice of bread with jam on it and a tin mug of milky tea.

While she ate, with surprising hunger, the wardress chatted

on happily, talking about her family and friends and a party she had been to the night before on the beach at Anse la Mouche.

When she finally waddled off with the empty tray Lani felt miserable again. The people were so naturally happy and relaxed, so different from where she had come from and where she might have to go back to

She had begun to sink into real despondency when the courtyard door opened again and she turned to see Ramesh being ushered through At the sight of his downcast face her own troubles became nothing.

She jumped up and rushed over and threw her arms round him, hugging him tight. The wardress beamed at them and went out, closing the door behind her.

Lani took his hand and led him over to the bench. As they sat down she said, "Ramesh, is it bad news?" She kept hold of his hand.

He shrugged. "Lani, about you there's no news yet Only the Governor can decide and he is away for a few days. Meanwhile I've retained a lawyer . . . a very nice gentleman called Rajaratnam. He is an Indian whose family have been here generations. He is not optimistic but will do his best . . . and I'm told he is very good . . ."

With deep concern she said "He must be expensive."

"Maybe, but I think not."

"And the boat? Is the engine very bad?"

In exasperation he burst out "I do not know! I do not bloody know! Excuse me!"

She was surprised by his fervour. She had never seen him incensed.

"Can you not find out, Ramesh? There must be a mechanic."

"Mechanic!" he snorted. "There is one in Mauritius. Another here in jail. And a third, who says he is, and who I am wishing was in hell and one day will be. Excuse me!"

"What happened?"

He turned to face her, drew a deep breath and the story came out.

The evening before when he had walked into the Yacht Club, Jack Nelson was sitting at the bar with Dave Thomas

and two other Englishmen. They formed a small intimate semi-circle and after glancing at him resumed their conversation.

Naturally shy, Ramesh hesitated to intrude He went to the other end of the bar, ordered a beer, and took it to a corner table. He nursed it for half an hour until the other two Englishmen left with jocular farewells Then he went back to the bar, closer to Thomas and Nelson, ordered another beer and then, with a sidelong glance, said to the bartender, "Perhaps these gentlemen would like a drink?"

Thomas shook his head good naturedly. "Not me thanks. My *bundu*'s cooking dinner and I've got to go." He gestured at Nelson with his thumb. "But Jack here'll have one. Never said 'no' in his life." He drained his glass, climbed off his stool, said to Nelson "'night you old bugger, see you tomorrow," and headed for the door.

Diffidently Ramesh sat on the vacated stool. The bartender put a frosted green bottle of beer next to Nelson's full glass.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ramesh Patel from Bombay."

Nelson nodded curtly and said "Jack Nelson " He did not hold out his hand.

"I understand you were in the Navy," Ramesh said.

Nelson appeared irritated "Who told you that?"

"Mr Rajaratnam. I called on him today "

Nelson's face cleared "Oh, old Raja. Good chap that. Yes, I was in the Navy, right through the war . . and a few years after it . . . Those were the days . . ."

He took a long pull at his glass and then refilled it, settled his bulk more comfortably on the stool and started reminiscing.

For the next hour Ramesh struggled to keep a look of interest on his face. He listened to Nelson's engine room exploits in every thing from battle ships to submarines. Every once in a while he muttered "Goodness me!" and "amazing!" Finally, six beers later and after a story which had Nelson lying on his stomach for forty-eight hours dripping oil onto the damaged shaft bearings of a Malta-bound destroyer Ramesh said:

"Mr Nelson, you must be a very good engineer "

Nelson shrugged modestly and his pendulous cheeks wobbled as he smiled. "Well we didn't get as many medals as the deck officers but we kept the bloody ships moving. We did our job!"

"Indeed," Ramesh murmured reverently. "I wonder if possibly you could look at my engine?"

Nelson's smile vanished. "Your engine?"

"Yes, it's a Perkins P4 and it's broken."

"I know it is. Listen, is that why you've been buying me all these beers?"

"Oh no. I was very interested listening to your experiences . . . really."

Ramesh had a guileless face and reading it Nelson became angry.

"You bloody people," he burst out. "You think you can buy a bloke a few beers and he'll do anything for you."

"No. No." Ramesh said hastily. "Of course, I will pay you for your time."

"Pay me!" Nelson roared and stood up and thrust his red, sweating face close to Ramesh "Pay me! You think I work for buggers like you? Christ, if I had my way your types wouldn't even be allowed in this club!"

"Really?" Ramesh said, his anger rising. "But you accept my drinks . . . what will you tell your friend tomorrow? That you've been getting free drinks from a wog?" He too stood up and they glared at each other. Then Nelson glanced at the bartender and said,

"Jimmy, give this bastard back his money. Put the beers on my chit." To Ramesh he said, "Take some advice. There's an Indian ship due any day en route to Bombay. Get on it and go home. You're no bloody sailor and never will be. I know about you. You're nothing but a bloody *babu*. Go back to pushing a pen!"

"And you are no engineer!" Ramesh retorted. "You are only talk. Big head! Sitting and drinking and talking and so on and so forth." He was surprised by his anger, but it was fuelled by worry and frustration. "You are a bigot," he went on. "You don't rule the world any more in your sun hats and stupid baggy shorts; with your servants and posh, racially pure clubs. Those days are over Nelson. Your type is dying out

and not too soon. You will soon be an extinct species and I say hooray to that!"

He turned and walked stiffly to the open door, leaving a speechless Nelson at the bar, literally quivering with indignation.

"So you see, Lani, I still don't know what's wrong with the engine . . . or even if it can be repaired."

Lani nodded mournfully, but then squeezed his hand and smiled encouragingly.

"Never mind Ramesh Something will turn up Wait! What about that Indian ship that is coming You could ask the engineer to look at it."

He nodded. "I had thought of that and of course I will do it. But the ship only stays a few hours before proceeding."

Lani digested that and then quietly asked, "Have you thought of going back to Bombay on it?"

Ramesh sighed. "Of course that possibility had occurred in my mind . . but it would be the end of a dream, and also . . . well what about you?"

She squeezed his hand again. "Ramesh, I forced myself on to you without choice I am not your responsibility. You must decide what to do without thinking of me."

He smiled down at her "Lani that is not possible." He glanced at his watch "The lawyer will be in his office now. He is a sensible man I will ask his advice about *Manasa*, about you, and even about me. I will come up to see you again this evening."

They stood up and she hugged him and kissed his cheek. "Keep your spirits up Ramesh," she said. "Forget stupid men like Nelson. Something will turn up "

His meeting with Rajaratnam had left him even more depressed The lawyer could only suggest that he ask a certain Jean Lamont to look at the engine. He was a sort of workshop assistant to the absent Charlie Marzzochi, but his reputation was that of being more a floor sweeper than mechanic.

About Lani he was also pessimistic. He had an appointment in the afternoon with the Commissioner of Police but,

knowing the man, he doubted that he would take a decision until the Governor returned. In the meantime Lani would probably have to stay in jail.

About Ramesh himself the lawyer was sympathetic but logical. If he was unable to get the engine even diagnosed by somebody competent, and if he was unable to afford to install a new engine his prospects were bleak and he should seriously consider taking the *State of Haryana* back to Bombay. Anyway, there was no need to take an immediate decision. The ship was not due for a few more days and in the meantime something might turn up.

"Turn up!" Ramesh thought bitterly as he walked down the street to the Yacht Club. The way his luck was running the only thing that might turn up would be a dose of typhoid.

He reached the Club and, seeing Nelson's white Ford Escort parked outside, moved round the outside of the building. Moodily he walked on to the jetty, then lifted his gaze and came to an abrupt stop. Sitting on a battered green toolbox next to *Manasa* was Jack Nelson himself. For a moment Ramesh disbelieved his eyes, then Nelson called out,

"Come on then. I've been waiting half an hour."

Slowly Ramesh walked forward and as the Englishman stood up said,

"But . . . I am not understanding."

Nelson was looking a bit sheepish. "Well, after I got home last night I had a few more drinks and thought about it . . . sure I was angry and said a few things – so did you, mind! But then I thought why shouldn't you ask me to look at the engine. What with Marzzochi away and that bugger Dauvell doing time, there's no one else . . ."

Ramesh was overwhelmed with relief. "That's kind," he muttered, "very kind . . ."

Nelson was obviously embarrassed. "It's OK . . . I've been getting a bit touchy these days . . . ever since the wife died . . . anyway, let's forget all that and look at the bloody engine."

Ramesh helped him lift the toolbox on to the deck and Nelson said,

"Look, don't get your hopes too high. I know I bullshit a bit but I was a bloody good engineer. But 'was' is the

operative word. For the past fifteen years I've been building roads and haven't even looked at a marine engine. You say it's a Perkins P4?"

Ramesh nodded.

"Well that's a help. I'm familiar with the type. They came out just before the war. How old is it?"

Ramesh said diffidently, "I think it must have been an early model."

Nelson grimaced. "Anyway, in those days they built good engines – let's take a look."

They manhandled the toolbox down the companionway into the saloon and Nelson looked about him and then said with grudging approval, "You keep a clean ship."

"Thank you. The engine room is through here."

He led the way down the passage and then squeezed back to let Nelson in through the low door.

Nelson surveyed the engine, nodding his head slightly, and then said, "Tell me exactly what happened."

"It was in the dogwatch," Ramesh answered "I was on deck, but sort of dozing. Suddenly there was a clattering noise. As I reached for the throttle there was a loud bang and the engine stopped."

Nelson made a sucking noise with this teeth "Humm . . sounds nasty. And she wouldn't turn over?"

"No. She won't turn more than a few degrees. What can it be?"

Nelson shrugged. "Any number of things First I'm going to remove the rocker box and take a look inside."

He was already sweating in the confined space and as he started to unbutton his shirt he said,

"Look it's going to take a while, and seeing that it's so old I might have to use a cold chisel. Why don't you drag the toolbox along here and then pop up to the Club and ask Jimmy to put some beers in a bucket of ice."

He handed Ramesh his shirt and with a small smile said "Tell him to put them on my chit " Before Ramesh could argue he turned away and bent over the engine, making tut-tutting noises.

As Ramesh walked up the jetty he was overcome with remorse, for when Nelson had removed his shirt and bent

over the engine Ramesh had seen just above the waist band of his shorts, on his right hand side, a strip of plastic about six inches wide. Ramesh recognised it instantly. It was the top of a colostomy bag, and it meant that Nelson had been operated on for cancer of the bowels. Ramesh's mother had undergone the same operation a few months before she died. It accounted for Nelson's loss of weight and poor skin colour The knowledge that he was dying must also account for his short temper.

Ramesh fervently wished that he could take back some of his words spoken the night before

10

"You want the bad news first, or the terrible news, or the catastrophic news?"

Jack Nelson looked quizzically at Ramesh, took a pull on the last bottle of beer and sweated from his recent exertions

They sat on canvas under an awning on the aft deck. It was noon and the sun, at its apex, was merciless.

"It is so bad?" Ramesh asked gloomily.

Nelson nodded, his face brick red from the heat. "I'll put it simply," he said. "I chiselled off the rocker box and found the rocker shaft displaced and bent. The valves were stuck. So I knew there was a serious timing problem. I removed the front pulley and damper and the timing case cover – all rusted and jammed and bloody difficult - to find that the timing chain had broken, messing up some of the crankshaft sprocket teeth. In effect your engine is sick and needs major surgery in the hands of an expert geriatric surgeon."

Mournfully Ramesh asked "But can it be repaired?"

Nelson took another swig of beer, drew a deep breath and nodded. "Anything can, given the time, spares, tools and expertise. But it's a dirty, difficult, hot and frustrating job. As to spares, I found a few things in your junk box. Some old valves that could be refaced, with luck, and a cylinder head gasket. The big problem is the timing chain. If you find one ashore it's just the beginning. The sprocket has to be built up with welding and the damaged teeth reformed by filing and then case hardened. The rocker shaft would have to be carefully straightened together with one rocker. When you get the head off you're sure to find damaged valves and probably the tops of the pistons The sprocket and chain need replacing, having retimed the valves and fuel pump. A cork gasket would have to be made and the front refitted. Then the pulley and so on."

Ramesh vainly tried to take it all in. He was shaking his head in bafflement, but Nelson plunged relentlessly on.

"After that, replace the cylinder head and valves gear, recheck the timing and replace the injectors, manifolds, exhaust system and ancillary pipework - in effect a rebuild."

He paused for breath and sucked in some more beer and contemplated Ramesh's puzzled face.

"OK," he said. "It's double dutch. In laymen's terms a top class mechanic with the right workshop and spares could fix it in about ten days. The only one I know is Charlie Marzzochi. He's young and without formal training but he has a feel for engines and he has a workshop. Trouble is finding a spare timing chain. Also he's not here and might not be back for weeks . . . how long can you wait?"

Ramesh spread his hands. "I've no timetable. But all this sounds expensive."

Nelson shook his head. "Not really. For ten days' work Marzzochi would charge you about two to three thousand rupees . . . if he can find a timing chain and . . ." Abruptly Nelson stopped talking and frowned in concentration. "Wait a minute – yes. Last year he showed me round his workshop . . . bloody well laid out . . . he has some old engines for cannibalising. There was a P4 – just a skeleton, but the chain was there."

Nelson hunched forward, the now empty beer bottle gripped tightly in his right fist. He cogitated for several minutes, his lips compressed, then slowly he looked up at Ramesh and his sweating, sagging face cracked into a broad smile, lighting up the whole atmosphere.

Ramesh smiled back tentatively, somehow absorbing the strange luminosity of Nelson's mood.

"Me!" Nelson said emphatically. "Never mind Marzzochi – I'll do it!"

There was a silence while the two men looked at each other, Nelson still with a lopsided grin.

Then Ramesh asked faintly, "Is it possible?"

Nelson sank back in his chair and lowered the bottle carefully to the deck. "Yes," he said firmly. "I'll use Charlie's workshop – he won't mind – I'll fix the bloody thing!"

His mood was almost euphoric and Ramesh sensed the

reason. For the last three hours Nelson had been reliving his youth, rediscovering old skills and energetic pleasures. It was the esoteric challenge of the born engineer – taking an old, tired hunk of machinery and making it work again. Proving to one's own self that the skill was still there even if long dormant.

Ramesh, in spite of his anxiety, felt a sudden pleasure at Nelson's enthusiasm and was strangely pleased by his own negative contribution.

Nelson was concentrating again and talking as though to himself. "A couple of days to dismantle and remove the cylinder head and the other messed up stuff . . . then in the workshop. I'll start after lunch." He stood up and started pacing – three steps each way across the deck – and Ramesh could mentally superimpose on the slack, obese figure a young, vibrant and inventive man lying on his belly for forty-eight hours dripping oil on to a destroyer's shaft bearing. He smiled and said:

"Mr Nelson you turned up!"

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter – so sorry about last night and your shorts are not stupid but they are a little baggy!"

Nelson grinned. "Accepted. By the way, the name's Jack." He stopped pacing and held out his hand. "Let's start afresh."

Ramesh stood up and shook the proffered hand formally. "And I am Ramesh."

There was a brief, slightly embarrassed silence which comes when two basically shy and opposite people start down a path of friendship. Ramesh broke it by saying "What about some lunch?"

"Good idea. By the way, what about that young stowaway you brought in?"

Abruptly Ramesh's mood turned sombre. "It's a problem," he said. "They hold her in jail waiting the Governor's return. This afternoon Mr Rajaratnam is to see the Commissioner of Police to try to get her released . . . he is not optimistic."

"And if he gets her out?"

Ramesh shrugged. "Well if you fix my engine I will take her on with me; she has no home and, well, we sort of get on."

Nelson was buttoning his shirt. He looked up with a

knowing grin but seeing Ramesh's face the grin faded. "Get on how?" he asked seriously.

"Oh nothing like that," Ramesh was embarrassed again. "She's really just a child in a way. I'm worried about her."

Thoughtfully Nelson finished buttoning up his shirt and then said, "Well Bob Black is a good chap, but indecisive. He always did need a push. He lunches at the Seychelles Club in Victoria. Let's go over there and give him a nudge."

They turned at the sound of an engine and watched a black hulled, two masted flush-decked motor sailor come in past the small island at the entrance of the yacht harbour. There was a group of three men on the foredeck and behind the wheel a hulk of a man with a short, black beard and black matted hair on his arms and bare chest.

"*Jaloud*," Nelson muttered grimly, and pointed with his chin at the helmsman. "Danny Lascelles. Give him a wide berth, Ramesh. He's a mean bugger . . . come on, let's go."

They left the *Manasa* and walked down the jetty. The tall brown Anglo-Indian and the flabby red Englishman. They walked with a jaunty step.

Book Two

11

The wet smack of flesh pounding on flesh was the worst sound Kirsty had ever heard. It was Cady's flesh being pounded and as it continued with rhythmic horror she stood numb and paralysed. Finally when Cady hit the gravel car-park and curled into a foetus, and Lascelles started to kick him viciously, Kirsty screamed and started forward. The Portuguese grabbed her from behind, pinning her arms tight and lifting her feet from the ground, holding her firmly while she struggled and screamed. The others stood in a group watching as Lascelles tried to kick his way past Cady's sheltering arms to his face. For Kirsty it was an eternity in Hades before he finally smashed his boot into Cady's kidneys and turned away, his eyes gleaming with sadistic lust, spittle drooling from the corner of his mouth into his beard. Chest heaving, he grunted, "That'll teach the cocky little bastard." He grinned at the Portuguese. "Let her go, Carlo."

As soon as Kirsty's feet touched the ground and the restraining arms were gone she ran sobbing to Cady's still form, dropping to her knees beside him. He was still curled up tight, his arms over his face. As she murmured his name and gently tried to pull his arms apart an object dropped on to the gravel beside her. It was Garret's gold watch. She looked up to see Lascelles' grinning face.

"Have the bloody thing," he said, then pointed at Cady. "When pretty boy that was wakes up, tell him to stay in his own league."

He turned away and the Portuguese and the others followed him back into the bar.

Three hours later Kirsty sat by herself at a table on the terrace of the Northolme Hotel. With the little bay below her with its sandy beach facing a solitary rock on which incredulously grew a solitary coconut tree, and with the sun setting

and casting a red glow, it was an idyllic setting contrasting with a woman in the depths of misery.

As soon as Kirsty had managed to pry Cady's arms apart and had seen the bloody mess of his face, she had gagged and almost vomited, quickly jumped to her feet and ran down the drive to the road. A Camion, one of the brightly painted open trucks that the Seychellois use for buses, was coming down the hill. It was loaded with plantation workers returning home. She ran into the middle of the road, waving her arms, and the Camion screeched to a halt. Minutes later gentle hands were lifting Cady in the back, cradling his head on Kirsty's lap, then they were bumping along the rutted road the mercifully short distance to the hospital.

He had been conscious, grunting as they hit bad potholes At first Kirsty had thought he might be dying, she had never seen a face so battered. Lips already swelling like inner tubes, the nose squashed and angled, half a dozen cuts oozing blood He looked as if he had walked into a high speed fan with sharpened blades. She remembered the heavy gold rings on Lascelles' fingers and hatred mingled with her anxiety. One eye was already a closed slit but the other was open and looking up at her. She bent her head down.

"Don't worry Cady," she murmured close to his ear. "We'll be at the hospital in a couple of minutes."

He nodded slightly and she saw his lips move and thought he was trying to speak but then among the red she saw a flash of white as his tongue pushed out a piece of broken tooth. Carefully she picked it off his lower lip and, not knowing what to do with it, held it in her hand.

At the hospital they had fetched a stretcher and taken him straight into the casualty room A nurse started wiping blood from his face, then an Irish doctor called O'Reilly arrived Kirsty smelt whisky on his breath but he had a competent air. After a quick examination he asked Kirsty to wait outside. She sat on a chair in the corridor and a nurse brought her a cup of tea, telling her proudly that it contained real cow's milk Apparently a rarity on the island.

After half an hour O'Reilly came out wiping his hands on a towel. One look at Kirsty's anxious face and he smiled "Don't worry yourself – he'll be all right." He took the seat

next to her, dropped the blood stained towel over his knee, pulled out a packet of cigarettes and offered her one. She shook her head with a touch of impatience. He lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply and then exhaled in a slow sigh.

"Danny Lascelles," he mused. "If I was in private practice I could retain that bugger and he'd send me enough customers to keep me in clover."

"How bad?" Kirsty asked cryptically.

"Not as bad as it looks," O'Reilly answered. "Oh, to be sure a broken nose, I suspect a fractured cheekbone and maybe a couple of cracked ribs, but I won't know until the radiologist arrives and takes some X-rays. He'll have quite a bit of internal bruising as well as the surface stuff and he'll give old Morey the dentist a few hours' work. All in all a grade 'A' Lascelles beating. He did the same thing to a British seaman off a merchant ship a few months back . . . at the Trianon too. Some contretemps over a poker game."

The anxiety began to leave her face. "But he'll be all right?"

O'Reilly nodded. "I can't be positive until I've seen the X-rays but luckily he's young and strong and very fit. I'll have to stitch some of the cuts on his face and he'll carry the scars. I'll do what I can with the nose." He took a thoughtful pull on his cigarette. "Was he handsome? It's a bit hard to tell."

"Yes, very," Kirsty answered and, in spite of her misery, had to smile a little. "But I don't think scars and a broken nose will bother him a lot."

O'Reilly had looked puzzled and was about to say something when a dark skinned young man came hurrying down the corridor.

"Leclerc, the radiologist," O'Reilly explained, and stood up and introduced her, then said "We'll have the X-rays in half an hour. After that you can see him. I'll keep him in for two or three days for observation just to be sure. Come and see him in the morning after eleven." He smiled. "I'll ask the dentist to come in early so his mouth might be functioning a bit better."

Now, as the sun dropped below the horizon, Silhouette Island ten miles away lived up to its name, looking like a black

mountain with the red sky a red-curtained backdrop, Kirsty reviewed her position.

By the time the *State of Haryana* had arrived in the Seychelles her friendship with Cady had markedly deepened. She was physically attracted but conversely never viewed him in a romantic light. The friendship was platonic and would always remain so. She convinced herself of that, and she hoped that his feelings and expectations were the same

The remainder of the voyage had been more than pleasant. Together with the Savys and Stevens they had made a relaxed group, the conversation and companionship interesting and easy.

The ship had anchored in the roadsteads and a launch had taken them to the long pier where they cleared Customs. On the way Cady had casually asked the helmsman if the yacht *Jaloud* was in port. He had nodded and pointed to the twin black masts showing over the Yacht Club breakwater. They said goodbye to the Savys, promising to try their best to visit them on Bird Island. Stevens phoned the Northolme Hotel to book them in and, despite their protestations, had driven them there along the winding coast road and introduced them to the owner, a widowed Mrs White who ran the place with the help of her twelve-year-old daughter and a handful of local staff. He had left them with a firm invitation for dinner once he had cleared a date with his wife.

The hotel was an old converted plantation house with vast flower-filled gardens and wooden floors that creaked, and old furniture and panoramic ocean views. It was charming and Mrs White, a big, robust woman, gave them a warm welcome. It was largely lost on Kirsty, who was almost vibrating with impatience to confront Lascelles. She asked Mrs White to phone for a taxi and quickly unpacked her suitcase.

On the way to the Yacht Club both she and Cady had been silent and preoccupied. The taxi driver was loquacious, pointing out places of interest, but he soon caught their mood and also lapsed into silence.

Apart from a drowsy bartender, the Yacht Club was empty. It was the middle of the afternoon when most people take a siesta. They had walked through on to the balcony and for several minutes stood watching the black hulled yacht. The

deck was tidy and deserted. Kirsty tried to imagine Garret on it. Tried to picture a stormy night so many weeks before, Her son working on deck, losing his footing and falling over the side. She noted the high stanchions surrounding the deck and the two tight rows of wire between them. It was a wide, flush decked boat with the outside steering position behind a low deck house.

Just as she wondered if Lascelles was below deck Cady turned and called to the bartender.

"Is Lascelles on board *Jaloud?*"

The bartender roused himself and shook his head. "It's Friday. They'll be at the poker game up at the Trianon."

"Where's that?"

The bartender gestured with his thumb over his shoulder "Up the hill on the road to Beau Vallon. It's a bar with a pointed green roof."

They took the taxi and paid him off in the carpark for it was only a short walk down the hill to Victoria.

The bar was dirty and dim and as Kirsty's eyes adjusted to the gloom she felt a stab of frustration. Apart from a mulatto girl in a dirty dress sitting at the bar, and an old man behind it polishing glasses, the place was empty.

From behind her Cady asked "Lascelles?"

The girl pointed a red-tipped finger at a far corner. It was empty but then Kirsty noticed the brown door knob and the faint outline of a door painted dark green like the walls. With determination and Cady behind her she strode over and pulled it open to find herself facing a wooden staircase.

At the top was another door and she could hear the murmur of voices behind it.

At her shoulder Cady asked softly, "Shall I go up first?"

Firmly she shook her head and moved up the steps. At the top she paused, took a deep breath, opened the door and walked through.

It was a large, windowless attic. Light was provided by a single unshaded bulb which illuminated the wooden table and the five men sitting round it. The table was littered with bottles, glasses, overflowing ashtrays and piles of money. The room stank of beer and sweat and greed. The biggest pile of money was in front of the man facing her. His shape

was that of a tall cardboard box. His face had the look of someone constantly on the edge of a tantrum. His eyes were widespread and narrow and his jutting beard gave him a dominating, thrusting appearance. His right hand lay across a deck of cards. There were heavy gold rings on the fingers and another on his left hand which gripped a glass of whisky. On that wrist a gold watch glinted in the light and Kirsty knew that finally she was face to face with Danny Lascelles.

All the men were looking at her and the blond giant at her shoulder. The one on Lascelles' right, almost as big and even swarthier, grinned and asked in a heavy accent, "Hi, honey – come to join the game?"

She ignored him. Her gaze was locked on Lascelles' face. It had a look of expectation, or was it a kind of recognition?

"You are Danny Lascelles," she said.

"That's right, Lady. So?"

"I'm Kirsty Haywood."

He nodded with mock gravity, a half smile on his thin lips. He raised his glass and tilted it at her. Kirsty leaned forward slightly. "Garret Haywood's mother."

For a moment Lascelles did not connect, then with comprehension the smile faded. He slowly lowered the glass. There was a silence, then, "Aah. The kid who drowned . . ."

"No Lascelles He did not drown. Garret is alive."

She was intently watching his eyes and in a brief, almost subliminal moment she saw what she had given everything up for and travelled thousands of miles to see. Not shock or surprise, but an unmistakable instance of animal panic.

Lascelles was a poker player and his eyes were now blank, but Kirsty was flooded with certainty and relief. She had seen it.

"Alive?" he muttered and glanced at the man next to him, who was looking at Kirsty with a curious expression.

"What do you mean, he's alive?" Lascelles asked. "How could . . . where is he?"

Kirsty pointed a finger at him. Her voice rose a notch. "You know where he is. You tell me."

Lascelles leaned back in his chair, which creaked with his bulk. He looked thoughtful.

"How do you know?" he asked. "How do you know he's alive?"

"I just know."

"How?" He said it aggressively, and when she failed to answer he nodded as if in confirmation and glanced again at the man next to him. "Intuition," he said. "Or a mother's instinct. It's not unusual. Sorry Mrs Haywood, your kid's dead." He gestured to his right. "Carlo here was with me. It was a bad storm. One of those bloody accidents that shouldn't happen but does. We searched three days. Right Carlo?"

The Portuguese nodded sombrely. "Sure. Rough as hell. Sorry Lady, he was a good kid. These things happen."

Both men were nodding in unison. Lascelles had composed his features into a caricature of condolence.

Again Kirsty pointed a finger. This time at Lascelles' left wrist. "Where did you get that watch?"

Slowly Lascelles' eyes moved to the watch. Then to the deck of cards in front of him. He tapped it with a nicotine stained finger.

"Poker. I won it playing poker."

"It's Garret's," she rapped out.

He nodded. "Right. I won it playing poker."

Kirsty shook her head emphatically. "He would never play poker for that. It was his father's. He treasured it like nothing else."

Lascelles shrugged. "Well, he got deep in a game and tapped out. A man has to pay his poker debts."

"You're a liar!"

Lascelles' face changed in an eye blink. The black jaw thrust out, the mouth twisted in anger. "Give thanks you're a woman," he snarled. "If a man says that I break his head!"

Then Cady joined the conversation. He moved alongside Kirsty and drawled, "Lascelles, I'm callin' you a liar. An' in case you hadn't noticed, I ain't no woman."

Abruptly Kirsty was out of it and virtually ignored. She remembered later how the preliminary stages were almost a ritual. A kind of tribal war dance. The looks and movements and conversation followed a prescribed pattern. Cady looking at the four other men and asking casually, "They in or out?"

Lascelles said contemptuously, "They're out – no one fights for me – or needs to."

They trooped downstairs through the bar and out into the sunlight with Kirsty consumed with anxiety. In the carpark she grabbed Cady's arm and said urgently "Forget it Cady Let's go."

He brushed her aside, his face rigid. He was walking in a curious stiff-legged way, and so was Lascelles.

They stopped in the centre of the carpark and the others formed a circle around them. Carlo was close to Kirsty, his eyes animated.

They stood about two yards apart. Lascelles had a half smile on his lips. He cocked an eye at Cady and said, "Shirts off?"

Cady nodded and pointed to Lascelles' fingers. "Rings too."

"Sure."

As Cady looked down and began undoing his shirt buttons Lascelles started to twist one of the rings off. He called out, "Hey Carlo, hold these for me," and casually moved forward.

Cady looked up sharply, but too late. Lascelles' right fist with ringed knuckles was already hooking in to his jaw.

That blow decided the fight. Cady's eyes glazed over. He tried to grapple but Lascelles slammed a left and a right low into his belly, forcing the wind out of him; then, with the half smile back on his lips he picked his spots, chopping at Cady's face and body like a punchbag, until he was dropped like a tree and the kicking could start.

12

"I finished building up the sprocket," Nelson said with satisfaction, took a deep pull of beer and set the mug back on the table.

Ramesh and Lani murmured words of appreciation. They were also sitting on the bar terrace of the Northolme Hotel, although at the other end from Kirsty. Half a dozen other people, all locals, were drinking at the bar.

"It must be very hard work," Lani said and gave Nelson one of her smiles. He was already captivated. He was the sort of man who blossomed in the presence of beauty, his normally sedentary attitude being replaced by bonhomie and wit. He nodded sagely.

"It is lass. It's a bit like taking an old and creaky lady and turning her into . . . well something like you."

Lani grinned. "Good. So when I'm old and creaky I'll come back to see you."

For a moment Nelson's face clouded, but then quickly cleared. "You do that lass. I'll replace your sprocket and chain and retime your valves."

"I just wish I could help," Ramesh interjected. "I feel so helpless just watching."

"Don't worry," Nelson said soothingly. "Some people are more mechanically minded than others. In the Navy you'd've been a deck officer. Anyway at least you're learning how the thing works."

"Indeed yes," Ramesh nodded enthusiastically. "I have learned so much . . . what was black magic is becoming true medicine."

Nelson signalled the bartender for more drinks and settled back comfortably in the cane chair. He was obviously enjoying himself. Once in a while he glanced at the woman sitting alone across the terrace.

"Another week or so," he said, "and we'll be able to push the tit and see if she starts. After that I'm going to dismantle your bilge pump and check it . . . and the sea toilet and anything else mechanical. Then you can go."

Ramesh started to murmur his thanks when a large woman deposited a glass in front of the empty chair and sat down.

"Hello Jack," she said. "I'm going to join you for ten minutes while Fiona does her fish feeding act and then I'm in the kitchen."

Nelson introduced her as Joan White, the owner, gave her a brief résumé of their odyssey and then asked, "So what's new Joan? How's business?"

She shrugged. "Quiet as usual this time of the year I only got two off the *Haryana* and one of those is now in hospital."

"What happened?"

"God knows. A woman and a younger man. They unpacked, caught a taxi into Victoria and apparently ended up at that dump the Tiranon. Lascelles was there and beat the man up."

Nelson swore under his breath. "That Lascelles. He's got a fuse shorter than a bitten thumb nail." He pointed with his chin. "Is that the woman?"

Joan nodded. "She's American. He's Canadian. Good-looking hunk of a man. Apparently they met on the ship."

Ramesh and Lani turned to look.

"She appears extremely sad," Ramesh commented.

"She is," Joan agreed "I don't know if they're lovers . . . they booked separate rooms. Jack, would you ask her to join your table at dinner?" She winked. "With your renowned charm maybe you'll cheer her up."

Nelson looked dubious but Lani said "Oh yes! Go on Jack . . . you'll make her laugh."

Just then a plump young girl walked past carrying a dish.

"Come on," Jack said, standing up. "This is a nightly ritual and you shouldn't miss it."

They walked over to the edge of the terrace together with the others from the bar. The little bay lay about thirty feet below. A light set in the rocks below the water had been switched on and the water and sandy bottom were vividly illuminated. A score or so of the brightly coloured fish were

swimming around expectantly, some only a few inches long, others two feet or more. The plump girl appeared on the beach. She was barefoot and wearing a red sarong which was hitched up around her hips. She waded in past her knees then took something from the dish and held it under water. Immediately one of the bigger fish nosed in and delicately took it from her fingers. Lani laughed in delight and clapped her hands. The girl fed the fish for ten minutes, making sure they all got a morsel, even shooing some of the bigger ones away to give the tiddlers a chance.

Nelson was standing next to the American woman and heard her exclaim "They're so tame!"

He turned and said, "Joan forbids fishing of any kind down there." He pointed to the girl. "Fiona, her daughter, has been feeding them since she was a toddler. Some come and some go but she has names for them all. If you go swimming they sometimes nibble at your skin, apparently for the salt."

She was entranced by the spectacle, for the moment her misery forgotten. As the girl turned and waded ashore Jack said,

"Sorry to hear about your friend. Is he badly hurt?"

Immediately her face fell. "Quite bad, but the doctor says he'll be all right."

"Which doctor?"

"O'Reilly."

"He's good," Nelson said reassuringly. "Drinks a bit, but then who doesn't?" He paused a moment. "Look, if you're by yourself why don't you join our table for dinner? My friends are an interesting pair . . . might take your mind off things."

Jack Nelson was neither attractive nor smoothly charming but he did have a sort of bluff sincerity. He saw the woman hesitate and then nod.

"Thank you."

"Good. I'm Jack Nelson."

"Kirsty Haywood."

Five minutes later they were all seated on the dining terrace. Sensing that she would like to forget the afternoon's incident Jack steered the conversation to the journey of Ramesh and Lani. Kirsty listened politely but it was obvious

that she was preoccupied. Ramesh was very aware of it. He was sitting opposite, covertly studying her face. She raised her eyes to his and he looked away, embarrassed. But a few minutes later he was again watching her, unable to comprehend what drew his eyes back. He knew it was an attraction but at first did not understand it. She was not talking, so what was the interest? Then abruptly and embarrassingly he knew. It was physical. The woman was warming him – physically! He was bemused. Certainly he appreciated beauty but in a controlled or esoteric way. This woman cut straight through to his senses. Why? How? Was it just looks? He appraised her face. Full mouth. High cheekbones. Gentle curve of her chin. Yes, beautiful, but it had to be more than that. Lani was beautiful in a different way. Perhaps more conventionally beautiful. There had to be something else. He was looking at her and thinking so hard that it was some time before he noticed that she was also looking at him. He coughed and turned his head in confusion. But he knew what it was. He had seen something in her eyes; as though he had seen her naked. This woman had roused him physically, not by her face or body but by something in her mind. Was that possible? Could a woman attract and stir a man with her mind alone? He was intrigued and disquieted and a little embarrassed.

The meal was a buffet of a large variety of local fish cooked in the creole style and while they all ate and Jack held centre stage the atmosphere was relaxed.

It was afterwards when he had petered out that the silences became oppressive and Kirsty's face grew even more melancholy. Both Ramesh and Lani tried to fill in, but without much success. Finally, in desperation, Ramesh steered the conversation to Jack's Navy days and for a while, with clever prompting from Lani, he reminisced about his war days.

After several stories Lani asked impishly, "Jack, didn't you ever do anything wrong . . .? Make even one mistake?"

She was smilling, her head cocked to one side.

Jack studied her lovely oval face for a moment, then nodded, his face turning sombre. He told them the story. The first time he had ever told it, and he did not understand what made him tell it now. Maybe it was the melancholy of the

woman sitting next to him or the knowledge that his life did not have long to run, or his new-found ability to look at himself from a different angle.

It involved the time early in the war when he served on a minesweeper. They had been based at Scapa Flow in Scotland. After a particularly drunken run ashore Jack had spent several hours working on the ship's engines. He was hung over and with a blinding headache and he did the work sloppily. During the night the ship was suddenly called out during a force seven. They were to sweep an area off the eastern coast of the Orkneys. It was miserable and dangerous work close in to a lee shore, and just before dawn the previous day's shoddy work had its consequences. He had not tightened up the oil filters properly and one after the other the engines seized up.

They were driven ashore under the cliffs of Stronsay and four of the crew were drowned. It was a very old minesweeper and its engine type notorious for unreliability and no blame was attached to Jack, but inside he knew that it was his fault.

The others listened with sympathy as he told them that from that day on he had driven himself mercilessly so to be sure that no one else would die because of his work.

"In that case," Ramesh said, "the incident probably saved many lives because you must have worked harder than ever before."

"Maybe," Jack conceded, "but I tell you, it happened over twenty years ago and it's haunted me ever since. Haunted me!"

Kirsty had been staring down at the tablecloth but at these words she raised her eyes to look at his face. She suddenly became animated.

"Haunted you." It was a statement not a question. She tapped the fingers of her right hand on the table. "That's what I'll do," she said as though speaking to herself. "I'll haunt him. Haunt him till I learn the truth."

She saw the puzzled look in the others' eyes and smiled grimly.

"I'm sorry. I must apologise. I've been lousy company and you've all been really kind. Fact is, I have a problem. I guess I owe you an explanation."

She looked at Nelson, then Lani and finally Ramesh She held his eyes for a long time and although when she finally spoke she was looking at Nelson, Ramesh felt that she was talking to him.

"I too have a story to tell. I've gotten wary of telling it, but tonight I will. Let's order some coffee."

They moved back to a table near the bar and, after being served with coffee and liqueurs, she briefly and concisely told them why she was in the Seychelles.

The only person to interrupt her monologue was Nelson, twice. The first time when she mentioned that Lascelles claimed to have searched for Garret for three days. Nelson snorted and said, "That black-hearted bastard wouldn't have searched for his own son for three hours!"

The second time when she described how Lascelles had given her back Garret's watch. Nelson shook his head, his jowls swinging. "He wouldn't give anything back which he had won at poker."

She had told her story eloquently, but without emotion until she came to the confrontation at the Trianon. Her audience listened enthralled as she described the moment when she saw the panic flick across Lascelles' eyes and she knew beyond doubt that she was right and that Garret was alive. Then her voice shook as she told of Cady's terrible beating.

The bar was deserted when she had finished. Before the others could comment Joan White came over and dropped a key on the table. With a smile she explained to Kirsty, "It's a custom here. The last hotel guest in the bar serves anyone else left, washes up the glasses and locks up. Jack will show you where everything is. We have breakfast in the kitchen. Just wander in when you're ready."

With a cheerful 'good night' she left them and was barely out of earshot when Lani, her eyes gleaming with excitement, asked, "So what do you mean 'haunt him'?"

Kirsty spread her hands. "Just that. I'll follow him wherever he goes. Whenever he turns around I'll be there." Fiercely she said "I'll haunt him until he cracks and I'll learn the truth!"

This was greeted with a silence and then Nelson said almost apologetically, "That's going to be difficult. He's

leaving in the morning with some ornithologists. He's been chartered to take them to Bird Island, the Amirantes and Aldabra. It's more than 700 miles to Aldabra After that he's dropping them off in Mombasa. It'll be a couple of months before they get there."

"No matter," Kirsty said without hesitation. "I'll find a way. Are there any boats for charter? I don't have a lot of money."

Nelson looked dubious. "There's a big Chris Craft at Praslin owned by an Italian, but he charters out for fishing at around a hundred dollars a day."

He saw her shake her head.

"Well, that only leaves the inter-island trading schooners. They're locally owned but I think they'd also want a fair whack. We can enquire in the morning. That apart, there's only small fishing boats and a couple of old cabin cruisers but they're not up to that journey."

Ramesh felt like a clairvoyant. He watched Kirsty's face and knew what was in her mind He did not understand how, but he knew. Her expression did not change but he knew the thoughts tumbling through her head

'Is this the end of the road? What can I do sitting here? Lascelles will go, and take his secret. Cady is broken and I'm alone I have no way. What of Garret now?'

He could feel her agony and suffer her frustration. He felt his own heart pounding. He leaned forward and said quietly, "I am owning a boat Mrs Haywood, as you know. I am thinking that I would like to visit those islands and then continue my journey to Mombasa." He turned to Lani. "What do you think Lani?"

She nodded enthusiastically Both Nelson and Kirsty were looking puzzled.

"But why, Mr Patel?" Kirsty asked. "I've only just met you."

"It matters not," Ramesh said. He gestured at Nelson "I only met Jack once and yet he helped me – even after I insulted him." He thought for a moment and then went on. "Maybe it's part of the way my life changed I mean, the foolish idea of a man like me giving up everything and sailing off round the world. It means, of course, you are

looking for something . . . an adventure . . . for people. Perhaps, Mrs Haywood, it is a kind of destiny that we meet. Just as Lani stowed away on *Manasa*."

"I don't know what to say." Kirsty murmured, then turned her head away as tears filled her eyes Lani leant over and covered her hand with her own. Nelson coughed and passed across a neatly folded white handkerchief.

"It's going to be quite a crew," he said gruffly. "An Anglo-Indian, a Chinese-Sumatran, and an American – all with as much experience of boats as a Tibetan monk . . . what about that Canadian feller?"

Kirsty dabbed at her eyes and said, "I don't know. I'm seeing him tomorrow morning. Maybe after what's happened he'll leave and go back to work."

"Anyway," Nelson said, turning to Ramesh, "I don't want to put you off, but be aware of the dangers. Lascelles is a vicious character – and so is his crewman Carlo The story is that Carlo joined him in East Timor a couple of years back. They had a fight there which ended in stalemate – apparently the only time Lascelles failed to win a fight – he promptly hired him and they've been together ever since; a right pair of bastards."

Ramesh shrugged. "I doubt he will try anything violent with people around. You say he has ornithologists aboard . . . ?"

"What are ornithologists?" Lani asked.

"People who study birds," Nelson answered. "These islands contain some very rare species. Anyway Ramesh, I admire what you're doing, but keep a sharp weather eye open. There's no law on the outer islands." He glanced at his watch. "Let's have a last drink to celebrate and get off home or we'll be here for breakfast!"

Kirsty could not find sleep. She lay in bed listening to the waves wash up the small beach below her window. She was mentally exhausted; her mind a maelstrom of impressions. Cady lying broken in the dirt. Lascelles sneering at her in triumph. Nelson with his interminable stories, and then the final one with his fat slack face dignified by confession and passing on to her the revelation of how to deal with Lascelles. Then the crushing realisation that she did not have the

resources to carry out her scheme. Finally Ramesh. She had noticed him watching her with his soft brown eyes. He seemed ill at ease during dinner, his eyes shifting to and fro. Hardly talking. What kind of a man was he? An Anglo-Indian, chasing a dream with a beautiful young Asian girl. Were they lovers? She thought not. Why the dramatic offer to take her on his boat after Lascelles? What was it about him that reminded her of Kevin? They were poles apart. This man had nothing of Kevin's power and personality. She drifted into a half sleep. Was it a dream or was she conscious when the realisation came that, like Kevin, this man could see into her?

In his bunk on *Manasa* Ramesh was also sliding into sleep. Why had he done it? On the drive back to Victoria Nelson had left him with no illusions about the danger Lascelles represented. He had not tried to argue him out of it, but had felt honour bound to inform him fully.

Curiously, Ramesh was not at all worried about Lascelles. He was profoundly worried about himself At his age he should not commit himself because a woman looked at him. Should not imagine he could read her mind. Not allow his senses to be drugged by a supposed attraction. He had drunk two glasses of wine with dinner. Maybe that was it. Maybe he had been drunk.

He turned over and pounded the pillow and settled his head and went to sleep, relaxed and knowing that he had not been drunk.

13

Kirsty heard his voice while she was still thirty yards down the corridor.

"No goddam drink-sodden Irishman is gonna tell me what to do!"

As she reached the door she heard O'Reilly's reply. "Get back into that bed you overgrown ape!"

Hastily she opened the door. They were standing by the bed glaring at each other. At least O'Reilly was glaring. It was hard to see Cady's eyes, which were sunk in folds of blackening flesh. His whole face was a patchwork of dark bruises and white plaster, and his mouth was distorted and swollen. He was dressed only in faded jeans and, apart from heavy bandaging around his ribs, the rest of his torso was also mottled with bruises.

They both turned and O'Reilly said, "Maybe you can make him see sense." He gave Cady a final disdainful look and strode past her and out of the door, closing it loudly behind him.

"Cady, what's going on?"

"I'm gettin' out of here – I hate hospitals!" He turned and walked to a chair and picked up his shirt. "Anyway, I'm OK. That bog walker doesn't know nothin'." His voice was slurred through his broken mouth.

"Have you looked in a mirror?"

He turned and tried to smile but it came out as a grimace. "Sure. Not a lovely sight. I ache all over but lying in bed ain't gonna help none. Best thing is to keep movin'. In a couple of days I'll go find that Lascelles and we'll see how he does in round two!"

She sighed. "God, Cady, you've just had the worst beating a man could ever have and you're looking for another one. Please sit down. We have to talk."

He shook his head and pointed at the bed. "No Kirsty, you sit down. There's a couple of things you have to understand."

He struggled into his shirt and she shrugged and moved to the bed and sat down. He stood, legs apart, and studied her face for a moment, then said:

"Just let me talk. Don't interrupt till I've finished. I've had a couple of worse beatings than that. Once when I was a kid of eighteen in Toronto. I got cocky with some guys in a motorcycle gang. They put me in hospital for a month. Another time a couple of years ago I was working on a rig and the cook was a Scotsman twice my age and half my size. He was one goddam lousy cook and one day I threatened to stuff some of his lousy stew down his throat. Turned out he was an ex-professional boxer, an' earlier had been an unarmed combat instructor in the Royal Marines." He paused and shook his head dolefully at the memory. "Another spell in hospital including a broken arm. But that time I got smart. When I got back to the rig I paid him half my salary for the next three months, and for many hours a day he taught me everythin' he knew. Hell, I even ate his goddam food and smiled sweetly. Well, since then I never had no trouble in a fight. Problem is it made me a bit complacent an' yesterday I paid the price." He drew a deep breath. "Understand Kirsty that Lascelles is just a brawler – sure, powerful and strong – but I made a mistake. I took my eyes off him for a split second at the wrong time. That one punch stunned me, made me goddam helpless. All I could do was cover up an' take it Believe me, that ain't gonna happen again."

Kirsty did believe him. In spite of the appalling condition of his face he still radiated strength and confidence.

"In a couple of days," he said. "we'll find out just how tough Lascelles is."

She shook her head. "He left this morning for Bird Island. Sit down, Cady, and I'll bring you up to date "

He sat down and she quickly ran though the events starting with the look she had seen in Lascelles' eyes confirming her belief that Garret was alive. Cady had seen it too and his shared belief warmed her deeply. She told him about Nelson, Ramesh and Lani and her plan literally to haunt Lascelles

until she learned the truth. She shook her head at his suggestion that he beat it out of him at the first opportunity. It wouldn't work. Lascelles would not incriminate himself because of a beating. Somehow she knew that if she stuck close to the man he would eventually crack. It was not a question of logic. Her whole quest was illogical. It was a total gut feeling. She then told him that it could be two months or more before they arrived in Mombasa. Perhaps he ought to do some fishing and take the *State of Haryana* on its next trip in three weeks?

At that Cady stood up and crossed to the bed and sat beside her and picked up her hand.

"No way, Kirsty. I stay with you – at least if you want me. I've still got around five thousand bucks left an' I'm in no hurry to get back to work." He squeezed her hand "I'll be around if Lascelles cuts up rough "

There was a silence then she said, "Cady, something worries me, and I have to talk to you very frankly." She looked up at him, her face very serious. "I'm not going to allow you to come along unless one thing is clearly understood. Otherwise I'll feel bad."

"What is it?"

She paused, knowing she had to pick her words carefully

"We're friends. Good friends I admire you more than I can say, and I'm grateful for what you've done and tried to do . . . but Cady, you must understand now that we're never going to be lovers . . ."

"Aw hell, Kirsty!"

"No . . . let me finish It has to be said. I don't want you spending time and money coming with me if you think anything more than friendship and affection might develop. I've only one thing in my mind finding Garret Nothing else matters. I don't have the capacity at this time to love anyone; maybe I never will have again."

Even as she said it she felt the doubt inside her. Remembered her thoughts of the previous night as she drifted into sleep.

Cady was nodding his head, his battered eyes narrowed in thought. He turned and took both her hands in his.

"OK, Lady. Now hear this. An' let's not talk about it no

more. What you said is true, an' I'm glad you said it. But get it clear I'm not comin' with you to try to get into your pants. OK? I know I said that night on the ship that I'm generally attracted to women older'n me and there ain't no doubt you're beautiful," he squeezed her hands tight. "But I'd rather have you as a real good friend without complications, without problems. Fact is, I never had a woman for a friend before. I like it. Any kind of sexual connection would ruin it. I know that just as you do. I'm comin' along to help a friend, that's all. OK?"

She saw the sincerity in his eyes and felt immense relief. She smiled and said, "OK. But do one thing for me. Stay in here one more day . . . please."

He shook his head. "Not necessary I know I'm OK. Today I'll rest up at the hotel and swim a little. Tomorrow I'll help this guy Nelson with the engine "

The next morning Nelson was filing at the damaged teeth of the sprocket when a shadow fell across the workbench. He looked up at the figure filling the open door, grinned and said "Don't tell me—you're Cady."

"Right on." Cady walked over and they shook hands.

Nelson said, "You walk through Victoria looking like that, you'll scare every child in sight."

Cady shrugged. "An' all the women." He was looking at the items on the workbench. He reached down and picked up a timing chain.

"Jeez! This looks older'n me!"

"It probably is," Jack said. "Do you know anything about engines?"

"A fair bit. I've been around machinery all my life." He was examining the sprocket in the vice. "That's good work, Jack. How can I help?"

Nelson took a handkerchief from his pocket, mopped his face, then took a cigarette from a packet on the bench and offered one to Cady, who shook his head. Nelson lit up, inhaled deeply and then blew smoke across the bench.

"Well," he said. "While I finish reforming these teeth you could straighten the rocker shaft and one rocker, then clean up and reface a couple of valves "

"Will do." Cady looked around the well fitted out workshop. There was another workbench with a vice further down. He walked over to a wall covered with neatly slotted tools and selected several. He put them on the bench and took off his shirt. Nelson winced as he saw the purpling bruises and the tight bandage. He said:

"Are you fit to work?"

"Don't start," Cady said shortly. "I've had enough shit from Kirsty and Mrs White I'm no goddam invalid!"

"OK OK." Nelson went back to his filing, but for the next few minutes he glanced repeatedly at the other bench, then, satisfied that Cady knew precisely what he was doing, he concentrated on his own work.

For the next two hours they hardly spoke a word, both absorbed in their efforts. Finally Jack glanced at his watch, put down his file and walked over to Cady's bench. He picked up a refaced valve and grunted in approval, then said, "Let's get a drink before lunch."

They were to join the others for lunch on *Manasa* and as they strolled across to the Yacht Club Jack described the further work needed on the engine and then said, "It would have taken me seven or eight days, but with your help we'll get it done in half that time or less – no doubt Kirsty's anxious to get after Lascelles."

"Just itchin'," Cady agreed, "but God knows how he'll react to bein' shadowed. Maybe he will crack, but I doubt it." He sighed. "Trouble is I can't think of any other way Kirsty's right; the truth won't be forced out of him."

Jack gave him a sidelong glance. "Do you truly believe the kid is alive?"

"Yes," Cady answered immediately. "I also saw that look in Lascelles' eyes at the Trianon but it's more than that. I've believed it since the first time Kirsty told me the story on the ship. Don't know why. I guess it's her total belief that kinda rubs off."

"She's quite a woman," Jack said almost wistfully, and Cady smiled and agreed.

"Yeah, she's a hell of a lady."

They found Kirsty and Ramesh in the Yacht Club talking to a redheaded man in his mid thirties.

Cady had not met Ramesh before and Kirsty introduced them and then the other man as Bruce McDonald.

When Jack had ordered a round of drinks he asked "Where's Lani?"

"Making lunch," Kirsty answered. "And it's going to be a treat. She found a little shop owned by a Chinese family and they had all the spices and stuff she needs. She went to the fish market and then chased Ramesh and me off the boat and told us not to come back till one o'clock."

Jack was impressed. "She's a good lass that." He literally licked his lips. "I haven't had real Chinese food for years." He turned to the red-headed man "How's the boat coming, Bruce?"

"Slow but sure Jack – another couple of months."

Jack took a pull of his beer and said seriously, "Well keep a good eye on her lad."

To the others he explained, "Bruce is building his own boat in La Digue that's the small island next to Praslin. He's building it for the third time because on the other two occasions some bastard burnt it just before it was finished."

"Why?" Cady asked.

McDonald shrugged. "Who knows? I suppose someone has a grudge but I can't think why." He did not look particularly put out about it.

"Can you join us for lunch?" Ramesh asked. "I'm sure there's enough food."

McDonald declined with obvious regret. He had just come over to pick up some copper bolts and was returning on the *Lady Esme* in a few minutes.

When he had left Kirsty said, "What a tragic thing to happen - and what perseverance But surely on such a small island somebody must know who did it?"

Jack said, "Kirsty, there are a thousand or so people on La Digue – and every one of them knows who did it. Just as we all know on Mahé and the other islands."

"Who?"

Jack told the story.

Bruce McDonald had been cruising the island a few years back as a crew member on a big French yacht. He had fallen in love with the place, especially La Digue, which was

completely unspoilt, without even a guest house on it. A few months later a rich relative had died, leaving him a substantial inheritance. He immediately made his way back to the Seychelles and announced that he was going to live on La Digue and build his own fifty-foot schooner in the traditional way – using the local Takamaka, Causarina and Filao woods.

The others listened raptly as Nelson explained how McDonald had gone to La Digue and rented some land right on the beach for a few rupees a year and built himself a little thatched-roof bungalow a few feet from the water and next to it a thatched roof on tall poles to act as a boatshed. Then he personally selected trees with the help of an old man who, in his seventy years, had built over a dozen schooners. With advice from the same old man he set to work sawing the planks by hand in the traditional way. He calculated that it would take him two years or so and he quickly settled into a routine: rising at dawn and working for three hours until it became too hot, then a swim and fishing for lunch and after lunch a siesta. Another swim and then three more hours work.

He settled into the life of the island and became very popular. He was the only foreigner and as the islanders watched his dedication and determination they became very fond of him and strangely protective. He would drink with the men in the evenings at the little bar cum general store; at first usually whisky but later, as he became used to it, the locally produced 'calou', a toddy made from the fermented sap of the palm tree and which was deceptively sweet with a kick like a mule.

The women used to cook for him, and the children would sit and watch him work and listen to his stories about far off places and cheerfully run errands.

On Saturday nights there was a dance in the open-sided copra shed. It was the antithesis of sophistication: a dirt floor, a wind-up gramophone and a plank between two barrels for a bar. But they were evenings of fun and laughter. They taught him to do the *sega* – the swaying, seductive dance typical in the old French islands of the Indian Ocean. It was at these dances that McDonald discovered the reality of what he had been frequently told: the Seychellois virtually practise

free love. Although all are Catholics, over fifty per cent of the children are illegitimate. Under the old Code Napoléon laws which the British retained from the French, a child born out of wedlock – and if recognised by the father – enjoyed the same rights and privileges in law as a legitimate child. Jack explained that the islanders were extremely free and easy in this respect. If a young unmarried girl had a child it was usually cheerfully looked after by its maternal grandmother with no stigma attached.

So McDonald discovered that he was living in paradise. His food, shelter and drink cost him almost nothing and at the dances on Saturday almost invariably a local beauty would give him a certain look while they danced the *sega* and later they would slip out to a quiet corner of the beach and make love before returning for more dancing and more *calou*. Of course, everyone knew where they had been, but nobody minded.

He had the perfect life, embellished by the fact that in building the boat he retained a purpose. He felt he was the kind of man who needed a purpose.

The two years passed quickly and the boat took shape and the time approached when he could soon install the engine and launch her into the clear water of La Passe bay. The islanders began preparations for a big feast. There would be 'millionaires' salad, made from the heart of a specially felled coconut tree, roast suckling pig, and the rarest of treats – a *cailie* – a dish prepared from a huge turtle with rice and vegetables simmered for hours in the shell. Copious amounts of *calou* were collected in anticipation

And then tragedy. After the usual Saturday night of drinking, dancing and love-making McDonald had come running into the village just before dawn waking up the islanders with shouts of 'fire!'

His bungalow and boatshed were three hundred yards away and by the time the islanders had organised a human bucket chain from the sea it was too late. The boat was blazing from stem to stern and when the fire was finally out all that remained was the blackened skeleton of the strakes.

The islanders were as heartbroken as McDonald. At first everyone assumed that it had been an accident but then the

old boat builder examined the remains and announced that it had been deliberate. The fire had started in at least three different places and, from the speed of the fire and the condition of the charred wood, he declared that petrol or some other combustible had been used.

The police investigated but drew a complete blank. They concluded that it may have been done by one of the young men, jealous of McDonald's success with the local girls. The islanders were sceptical.

In any event, after a week of mourning, McDonald announced that he would start again from scratch; and he did, and for two more years continued his idyllic life, barefooted and dressed only in a sarong.

But this time the islanders were taking no chances. As the boat approached completion, and without telling McDonald, they organised a roster of young men to keep a nightly watch. Again the village prepared for the launching feast and again the boat burned down. But this time McDonald had been seen drunk and with tears in his eyes, dousing it from end to end with petrol and tossing the match.

"He didn't wanna leave!" Cady exclaimed, shaking his head in amazement.

"Too right," Jack answered. "Once the boat was finished and ready to go he's the kind of man who feels that he should go – that's what he was building it for."

"But what happened?" Ramesh asked. "Did they confront him with it?"

Jack shook his head. "Oh no. They played out the charade. They consoled him and expressed admiration when he decided to rebuild again . . . After all, they like him and I suppose they understand him."

"It's nice," Kirsty said thoughtfully. "I mean it's a waste and everything . . but it's nice. Do you think he'll just go on building boats and then burning them?"

Jack shrugged. "Why not? He's got enough money to live on – and to buy the wood. I guess he'll eventually marry one of those girls and settle down and have a legitimate family – he's already acknowledged paternity for two sons." He glanced at his watch. "Come on, let's get at that food!"

14

The float dipped and Cady struck quickly. The rod arched and he started to reel in, peering forward into the crystal water. He saw the rainbow flash of colours while it was still several fathoms deep and he grunted in satisfaction. It was another parrot fish, and Joan White had told him that she particularly wanted parrot fish. She had lent him the rod an hour earlier and told him to find this rock about half a mile from the hotel and catch dinner for the hotel guests who numbered eight. She had waved a stern finger under his nose and told him not to fish within three hundred yards of the hotel.

He reeled the line in to the trace, then reached down and picked up the long-handled net beside him. A minute later the fish was flapping in the wicker basket alongside three other parrot fish and two red hind. Cady calculated that there was around ten kilos in the basket and that was more than enough.

He laid the rod down, but he did not get up. It was a very tranquil spot well below the coast road and far enough away to avoid the noise of the occasional car or Camion. In the distance he could just make out the low hills of Praslin and La Digue twenty odd miles away. He thought of the story of Bruce McDonald and decided that he could understand him; then he thought some more and ruefully concluded that he could not understand himself.

He had always been attracted by older women. He did not consider physical beauty to be vitally important in a woman. Of course, it helped, but Cady had never been attracted to a woman solely by her beauty. There was no doubt that Kirsty had beauty enough to stand out but Cady discounted that as any reason why during the past days they had been drawing closer and closer together. Without thinking about it he had

assumed that in the course of time they would become lovers. It seemed to be a natural, almost logical, progression. But their conversation in the hospital had put that into perspective and he was strangely relieved She was now a friend Not a prospective lover. Just a very good friend.

At this moment he was puzzled by himself. That day, for the first time, he had a physical reaction brought about only by beauty. It had happened as he was stepping on to *Manasa*. Lani had come up through the companionway carrying a tray and, as she turned to look at him he literally froze with one foot on the deck and the other on the jetty. Kirsty, Ramesh and Jack were already on board and did not see his reaction. He had recovered quickly and tried to analyse it. He had worked in Indonesia and travelled to Hong Kong, Bangkok and Singapore and had seen many very beautiful Oriental girls but had never experienced this effect.

Her own reaction to him had been exactly the opposite She had visibly recoiled at the sight of his battered face, then recovered and put the tray on the table.

The lunch had been superlative. Half a dozen different dishes, fish, vegetables, chicken and rice, all delicately flavoured. They ate with knives and forks, Lani explaining that although the shop had chopsticks it seemed silly to use them to eat off normal crockery. Cady asked if the shop had Chinese crockery. She nodded, but said that it was expensive.

Immediately Cady had turned to Ramesh and said "I'm going to buy a set and present it to the boat Food like this deserves it."

Ramesh looked down at his scratched plastic plate "Thank you Cady, I accept with pleasure "

"There's another thing," Cady said firmly "Kirsty tells me that you're taking us with you free of charge. Well at that time she wasn't sure if I was comin'. I can't afford to pay fancy charter prices but I can pay somethin' an I'm damn well gonna!"

Ramesh smiled and shook his head. "It's really not necessary. We were going that way anyway and I am relieved that you will be on board to help me with the engine. Is he not a good mechanic, Jack?"

"Sure is," Jack said through a mouthful of lemon chicken.

"No matter," Cady said. "If you won't take a fee then I'm gonna pay to provision the boat and fill her up with fuel and cover any other running expenses en route."

"I'll share it with you," Kirsty interjected. But Cady shook his head.

"No way. You hang on to your money; hell, I know we're on vital business but this is some holiday for me. I love boats and the sea and fishin'." He gestured at the laden table. "And as fine cookin' as I had in my life . . . No way. A man could pay a fortune for a holiday like that – so at least I cover the expenses."

He had given Ramesh a mock hard look and Ramesh had looked at Nelson, who said, "It's fair enough, Ramesh. Anyway the costs won't be high. With the monsoon blowing steady you won't need the engine much – and most of your food will come from the sea."

"All right," Ramesh had acquiesced. "Thank you Cady."

A thought struck him. "Why don't you and Kirsty move on board right away? It will save money and you can get used to the boat. Also it is close to the workshop."

They had discussed it and decided to stay one more night at the Northolme. Joan White had been kind to them and they did not want to upset her. Jack assured them that she would not mind but they decided to stay one more night anyway.

After lunch Kirsty, Ramesh and Lani had gone off in the car sightseeing, while Cady and Jack went back to the workshop. When Jack ran him back to the hotel Kirsty had still not returned, so Joan White had sent him off fishing.

Now he picked up the rod, net and basket and scrambled up the rocks to the road. A Camion went by and the passengers waved at him cheerfully.

Back at the hotel he found Joan sitting in the kitchen reading a magazine. He put the basket in front of her and she peered into it approvingly.

"Well done Cady. Fiona's in the bar with Kirsty. Go and tell her to give you a large drink on the house."

On *Manasa* Ramesh sat on the stern sipping at a beer and watching the sunset in what had become an evening ritual

Nelson had told him that on very rare occasions, when atmospheric conditions were perfect, a vivid green band could be seen for a moment across the sky just as the sun dipped below the horizon. The islanders considered it lucky and the occasion to make a special wish. He had watched for it every evening. This time, although the sun made its usual spectacular exit, there was no green band

From below in the galley he could hear Lani preparing dinner and he marvelled at his good fortune. It also made him consider yet again why he had offered to take Kirsty on her quest. After all, during those days before the engine breakdown he had discovered the perfect existence with Lani. Now there would be four on the boat and even if everyone got on famously it would not be the same Why had he done it? Certainly he was chivalrous by nature and her story had moved him, but he knew it was more than that. He knew that Kirsty Haywood had a strange effect on him and he was a little frightened to analyse it. She was attractive and intelligent and something more. That first night while she had told her story he had studied her face with its soft lines belying its strength and determination. He liked her accent, alien to his ears though it was. The way she moved her hands in expressive gestures as she talked. The quick and easy smile when something amused her.

In spite of certain apprehensions he was looking forward to the coming voyage.

15

"Hit the tit!"

"No!" Ramesh shouted down the companionway. "You come and do it."

Jack's muffled voice came again from the engine room. "Don't be bloody silly – hit the tit!"

"Absolutely not. That is for you to do." Ramesh looked at Kirsty and Lani standing next to him and they both smiled and nodded. A few moments later Jack, shirtless and sweating, came panting up the companionway. For the past four hours with hardly a break he and Cady had been reassembling the engine. A charger had been borrowed and the battery topped up. The engine had been primed and now the big moment had arrived.

Ramesh felt massive apprehension. Not for himself, although he prayed that it would start, but for Jack. Cady had told him that everything possible had been done but that engines could be 'ornery bastards with minds of their own – especially very old engines'. Ramesh wanted it to be Jack's moment of victory and accomplishment and he willed the thing to respond. Jack looked at the three of them and sniffed. He had a bustling no-nonsense air about him but they could all sense his underlying tension.

He wiped his face with a handkerchief and moved behind the wheel. With his thumb poised on the button he called down, "Ready?"

"Yo!" Cady's voice floated up, and Nelson pushed the button.

Ramesh did not breathe as he heard the starting motor turn the engine three, four, five times.

Nelson grunted, took his thumb off the button and edged up the throttle a notch; then he reapplied his thumb.

Again the engine turned half a dozen times and Ramesh

was in an agony of dread when on the seventh turn it coughed. once, twice and then roared into life.

Amid shouts of applause a hugely grinning Nelson eased back the throttle and listened as the engine settled into a steady rhythm.

They heard Cady's war-whoop from below, then he shouted,

"Smooth as a goddam baby's goddam ass!"

Ramesh pounded his hand exuberantly on Jack's wet back and then Lani and Kirsty hugged and kissed him. He had a look of almost comical modesty on his face. He kept breaking into a grin and then forcing his lips back to a straight line.

Dark blue smoke was drifting away from the exhaust under the counter and Jack noticed Ramesh's look of concern

"Don't worry," he grinned. "It's just blowing its nose. That will soon clear."

Very seriously Ramesh said, "Jack I am not able to find the correct words to thank you. I cannot think what I would be doing now if you had not helped me."

Jack waved a nonchalant hand, looking pleased but sheepish. "Forget it Ramesh – I enjoyed it. Anyway, Cady did a lot of the work – more than half."

"Bullshit!" Cady said cheerfully, coming up the companionway. His face and bare torso were still discoloured by yellowing bruises. "I just provided some labour." To Ramesh he said seriously, "I'm a fair mechanic but I wouldn't even have attempted that job. I don't have that kinda experience or knowledge. Jack's an engineer an' as fine a one as I've ever worked for."

Jack was trying to look modest again but then he noticed something. "Hello, what's this?"

They all turned to see Dave Thomas coming down the jetty carrying something rolled up under his arm. Behind him was Jimmy the bartender with a tray of glasses and an ice bucket.

"Champagne," Ramesh said. "I asked Dave to send it out as soon as he heard the engine start."

They climbed aboard and, while the glasses were being poured, Dave handed Ramesh the thick roll of paper.

"Admiralty charts," he said, "for all these islands. You've

probably got them but these have been annotated by local yachtsmen and the like, showing unmarked coral heads and so on. Just mail them back to me when you get to East Africa."

Ramesh started to thank him but Dave waved a hand in dismissal.

The glasses were passed out and they all looked expectantly at Ramesh.

"To Jack and a fine piece of engineering," he said.

They all drank except Jack. He waited and then raised his glass. "To *Manasa* and," a glance at Kirsty, "a successful voyage."

They echoed his words and drank and then Dave asked Ramesh, "When do you plan to leave?"

Ramesh shrugged. "Well if everything is all right I think we go at dawn tomorrow. If this wind keeps up we should make Bird Island by sunset." He looked at Jack for confirmation.

"Sure. Cady and I will check over everything else mechanical this afternoon Of course by now *Jaloud* could have moved on to the Amirantes . . ." He thought for a moment. "But still you'll have to go to Bird first. Those ornithologists don't have a fixed route or timetable They're certainly going to Poivre and then Aldabra but they could divert on the way Guy Savy will know their next destination after Bird."

"He invited us to visit him," Kirsty said. "We became friendly on the ship."

"Then it is decided," Ramesh said and drained his glass. "And tonight you will all be my guests at the Northolme. Dave, can you make it?"

"Sure," Dave answered with a grin. "Saturday night – Joan will put the record player on and we'll have a bit of a dance " He winked at Lani. "Do you know how to do the twist young lady?"

She looked mystified and Cady said, "Don't worry – I'll teach you." He glanced at Jack. "I'll toss you for who checks the bilge pump and who does the toilet."

Jack grinned. "No deal, you do 'em both while I check the steering mechanism and the wiring."

Cady grimaced comically. "I had a feeling that would happen."

Book Three

16

It looked like a huge swarm of bees circling above the green smudge on the horizon.

"Are they really birds?" Kirsty asked in awe.

"Must be," Cady answered. "Guy said there were close on two million of 'em from May through September."

They were standing on the foredeck of the *Manasa* as it heeled over gently on a broad reach.

"But it's so small," Kirsty said. "They must cover the place."

"No. Apparently they nest only on a couple of acres on the east of the island. Each pair has just a tiny patch of sand as its own territory."

Kirsty shook her head. "Cady, the whole island doesn't look bigger than a couple of acres."

He smiled. "We're still about ten miles off Kirsty – and it's very low. We'll be up to it in a couple of hours."

They turned and made their way back past the dog house. Ramesh was at the wheel and he did not look much better than when he had first woken up.

Cady grinned at him. "Still sufferin'?"

He nodded mournfully. "I will never, never drink again; never!"

"Oh come on, Ramesh," Kirsty said. "It was a good party and you weren't really drunk. Just kinda merry."

He smiled ruefully. "I was not merry this morning, I am telling you that."

Cady said, "Why don't you go down for a rest? I'll take the wheel and call you when we're a coupla miles off."

Ramesh looked doubtful. "But you have done more than your share."

"I enjoy it," Cady said equitably. "Bin a long time since I was on a yacht."

Gratefully Ramesh relinquished the helm and went below.

Kirsty sat on a canvas chair sunning herself and Cady was left with his thoughts.

It really had been a good party. Rajaratnam and Stevens had come with their wives. Earlier in the week Stevens had invited the four of them up to his tea plantation for dinner and it had been a pleasant evening.

As soon as they had all arrived at the Northolme, Jack Nelson and Dave Thomas appointed themselves bartenders for the night and set about it with a will.

Joan White had prepared a huge curry and, while it simmered, joined the others on the terrace. When Fiona went down to feed the fish she invited Lani to join her. Lani had bought some locally designed hand-dyed sarongs and was wearing one. It had a pattern in white and red, tucking in over her breasts and flowing down, moulding her slim body.

On the beach they both pulled up their sarongs and waded in. Lani was excited and skittish. When she held the first piece of food under the water and a big grouper nosed in for it, she shrieked and jumped back laughing, splashing water over herself and Fiona.

Cady decided he had never seen anyone so alive or unselfconsciously beautiful.

Down below, lying on his bunk, Ramesh was also remembering the party. He had taken three more aspirins and his headache was slowly abating. He too conjured up the image of Lani splashing in the water but unlike Cady it made him appreciate just how very young she was; hardly more than a child. He realised that over the past few days his feelings for her had truly coalesced and they were now definitely paternal. His searing concern when she had been locked up was the concern of a father for a child.

Halfway through the party Ramesh had suddenly realised that it was the only party he had ever attended in his life. He looked at the people around him and felt a great welling up of affection. Two months ago the only friend he had was Jaran Singh. Now he was surrounded by friends – and of the most unexpected variety. He had been musing on the strange twists of fate that had brought it all about when Jack came over with a tall frosted glass.

"Come on old cock. Enough of that beer, try this."

"What is it?"

Jack winked. "Singapore Gin Sling."

"Is it not very strong?"

"Just a trifle – but good for a party."

Gingerly Ramesh tasted it and immediately liked the refreshing bitter-sweet taste.

It was a hot night and he drank it rather quickly and then another. He calculated later that he had drunk four before dinner, but then everyone had been drinking at an accelerated pace.

After dinner, during which several bottles of dry white wine were consumed, they all went back to the terrace and Joan put some music on. About a score of locals had arrived at the bar, apparently Saturday night regulars. Tables were cleared to leave space for dancing and soon the terrace was alive with colour and movement.

Ramesh had wedged himself into a corner of the bar determined to be a mere spectator. He had never danced in his life and with his shyness was not about to start. Dave was doing a stint behind the bar and refused to serve Ramesh a beer.

"Stay with gin," he advised and twirled one end of his moustache, "with a little tonic and a lot of ice."

Ramesh readily agreed. He was feeling very relaxed. He watched as Cady taught Lani how to do the twist.

"Pretend you're dryin' your back with a towel," he said, and she did so and immediately had the swinging, swaying movement; laughing up at the giant who gyrated in front of her.

Later, when the music had slowed down, Jack led Kirsty on to the floor and Ramesh had been amazed that in spite of the man's bulk he was feather light on his feet. He commented on it to Dave who grinned and said, "A lot of fat men are good dancers. Wait till you see me!"

Kirsty was in a dark blue dress cut square across her breasts, tight at the waist and flaring slightly to just above her knees. After several days in the sun she was deeply tanned while her heavy hair, swaying on her shoulders as she danced, had become even blonder.

Ramesh had a couple more gin and tonics and was beating the bar with his hand in time to the music when she pushed through to him.

"Come on, Ramesh. You're the only one who hasn't danced."

"Oh no, Kirsty," he said in alarm. "I am not dancing. I am never dancing."

He pressed back against the wall but Kirsty grabbed his hand and led him protesting out on to the floor.

"But I am not knowing the steps," he said in real panic.

"Don't worry," she laughed. "Just move your feet to the music – follow me."

She slid a hand on to his shoulder and moved close. Tentatively he put his arm around her waist and felt himself moving against her, and with the music.

It was as though a magician had cast a sudden spell over him. His shyness and self-consciousness vanished and he felt the rhythm of the music from his hair to his toes, and the softness of the woman against him and the curve of her waist under his palm.

In disbelief he muttered, "I am dancing . . I am dancing."

Kirsty laughed in delight. "You're very good Ramesh – a natural."

They danced three times during the next hour and in between sat together at the bar and he told her a little of India and she contrasted it with her life in New York. He had never been so loquacious: talking and drinking and laughing as though he had known her all his life.

At one point she said, "Ramesh you have changed very fast."

He replied, "Anyone would who had spent thirty years working in an office and one day jumped on a boat and took off into the blue."

She smiled. "I think I know exactly what you mean!"

Towards midnight the locals gave a demonstration of the *sega* and afterwards dragged the others on to participate.

As Ramesh circled Kirsty in the hip-swinging contact-less dance he suddenly felt the eroticism of it. He looked at her face with its half smile and narrowed eyes looking back at him and a surge of warmth spread through his

body, as though he'd been abruptly immersed in heated syrup.

The sensation, together with the drink, had confused him and when everyone was heading back to the bar he strolled away further down the terrace and into the partial shadow of some Causarina trees. He was feeling a little dizzy and his head was a whirlpool of impressions and emotions. He told himself that it was due to the drink. He simply wasn't used to it.

After a few minutes his head cleared and he had turned to go back when he saw, a few yards away, the figure of Jack Nelson. He was standing in profile and with the light behind him Ramesh saw that his face was twisted in pain. He saw him reach into his shirt pocket and then pop something into his mouth. Ramesh moved forward, saying

"Jack, are you all right?"

"Oh . . . Ramesh . . . Yes." He paused and, with an effort, straightened his face. "Sure, just a bit of indigestion . . . too much curry."

Ramesh's euphoria had turned to sadness. He wondered whether he should say something, offer sympathy or understanding, but Jack's face had cleared and he was breathing easily. He clapped a hand on Ramesh's shoulder.

"Bloody good party, old boy. Too good to finish it early but you'd better get your crew back in an hour or so. It's a full day to Bird and you don't want to approach that reef in darkness."

He took Ramesh's arm and led him back to the bar and within a few minutes Ramesh had regained his mood.

His mood at dawn was something else again. He had awoken to his first ever hangover and in his ignorance thought he must be close to dying. Cady sitting on the opposite bunk and grinning like an ape had not improved his composure, but had given helpful advice and after Ramesh had held his head under the deck shower for ten minutes and taken three aspirin and managed to keep down a mug of tea and a slice of bread he felt marginally better. He had brushed aside suggestions that they postpone their departure for a day and started getting the boat ready.

It had been a sad farewell, particularly for Ramesh. They

all came to see them off. The Rajaratnams, the Stevens, Joan and Fiona, Dave and Jack and finally a sleepy-eyed policeman who had been assigned to ensure that Lani did in fact leave on the *Manasa*. He gratefully accepted a cup of tea and sat on the jetty gazing blearily out to sea.

Dave had brought three cartons for delivery to the Savys: fresh vegetables and other provisions, and mail and newspapers. For *Manasa* he had brought two enormous pork pies which he had baked himself and which were coveted throughout the islands.

Joan White had brought fresh home baked bread and a bottle of Gordons Gin which she presented to Ramesh with a wicked grin.

The Stevens had brought several kilos of their own tea, and Rajaratnam a basket of fruit from his garden. Ramesh spoke a few words of thanks to him and his wife in Urdu. He had been unable to get him to accept a single rupee for his legal services.

Jack Nelson had brought a long metal box about three feet long and a foot high. It was padlocked. He handed it to Cady, gave him a key and said "Stow this away carefully. Promise me that you won't open it until you've left Bird Island and you're well clear of the main island group."

The box was heavy. Mystified Cady had asked, "But what's in it?"

"Never mind," Jack said firmly. "If what's inside will come in useful keep it. If not, dump it over the side."

Cady took the box below and Ramesh had climbed on the jetty and taken Jack's arm and they walked away from the others out of earshot.

Ramesh struggled to find the words. "Jack I have made good friends here. People that before I would not be dreaming to become friends. All have helped me in my foolish adventure, but you have become special in my life I only wish that you could come with us."

Nelson half smiled "Believe me Ramesh, so do I. But that is not possible. I leave soon for England and will probably not return."

Ramesh said, "I know. That first day on *Manasa* I saw the edge of the colostomy bag. I wanted to cut off my tongue. My

mother had the same thing. What you suffered last night was not indigestion but very great pain."

They stood looking at each other for a long moment then Nelson nodded slowly. "So you know what it means?"

"Yes, but of course there is hope. It is not automatically terminal. They are always trying new drugs . . ."

"No, Ramesh," Jack's voice was firm. "I've got it in the stomach too and it's spreading. My weight's dropping off and the pain gets steadily worse. O'Reilly waffles on about another op but I've had enough. I'll go back to England and sort out my affairs . . . It's only a matter of months " He looked at Ramesh's grief-stricken face and reached out and patted his arm. "Don't worry. I'm not frightened of it. I was at first, but once you face something like that, and accept it . . . it's not so bad."

Ramesh did not know what to say. He was fighting back tears. "I . . . have so much to thank you for . . ."

"No! The thanks come from me. I enjoyed fixing your engine. It did a lot for my self-respect. And there's something else – thanks to you I won't die a bigot." His face was very serious but then it split into an affectionate grin. "In my will I'm going to leave you my stupid, baggy shorts – and you'd better wear them at least once a week!"

Ramesh managed to return the smile and Jack took his arm saying, "Come on. It's time you cast off."

The *Manasa* sailed after much hugging and kissing and hardly a dry eye in sight.

For the past half hour Ramesh had been dimly aware of an increasing noise. A sort of drifting and fading shrieking noise. His headache was now gone and he was about to go on deck to investigate when Cady called down.

"Ramesh. We're closing the island. In ten minutes we'll be off the western point."

Ramesh emerged on deck to an extraordinary spectacle which the others were already watching. About half a mile off the starboard bow was a long, low island seemingly covered entirely by coconut trees. An almost white beach ran its length. Above it, and over the surrounding sea, in their tens of thousands, birds wheeled and dived in what seemed

to be mindless confusion and in a cacophony of noise. The impression was exactly that of giant bees swarming around their nest, but then he saw some of them close to the surface, effortlessly contouring the waves, their wings motionless.

It was a spectacle he could have watched for hours but then off the beam he saw the white foam of the reef and he quickly moved up beside Cady and studied the chart weighted down in front of the wheel. Dave had pointed out the gap in the reef and the bearings to be taken and other precautions.

Ramesh was a little tense. Not because he worried about his ability to take *Manasa* safely in, but about Cady.

It can be difficult having two men on a boat. One the owner and the other knowing that the owner was not very experienced and perhaps believing himself to be more competent.

Ramesh realised that an important test was approaching Cady was at the wheel, standing relaxed with legs apart, gazing at the fast-approaching westerly tip of the island and occasionally glancing at the compass. Ramesh had finished studying the chart and was now going to take the wheel and con the boat in, but he did not want to say anything to Cady. It was foolish and he knew in a moment he would have to. It was necessary on this first day to assert his authority on all matters concerning the boat. He waited two more minutes and was about to open his mouth when Cady, without taking his eyes off the island, took a step to one side and with one finger steadying a spoke of the wheel drawled.

"Here you go Skip. Just tell me what you want me to do."

With a mental sigh of relief Ramesh took the wheel and said "Thanks. We'll be at the fairway in a few minutes. Let's get the sails in. Then please stay forward, prepare the anchor and keep a look-out for coral heads. Give hand signals and call out degrees."

He reached forward, switched on the ignition and then pressed the start button. The engine turned twice and then fired and Ramesh mentally sent more thanks sixty miles astern to Jack Nelson.

Fifteen minutes later they glided slowly in through the fairway with Cady leaning over the bow peering through the crystal water to the sand and coral below. Kirsty stood beside Ramesh. As soon as they had cleared the point they had seen only one boat anchored off the beach and it was a small cabin cruiser. An inflatable dinghy was pulled up on the beach next to a long dugout canoe

"Maybe he's on the other side of the island," she said.

"No Kirsty,' Ramesh had replied. "There's reef all round. This is the only entrance. Anyway, we'll soon find out."

They could just make out a building in among the coconut trees and two figures emerged and came down and launched the dinghy. Ramesh took off the power and *Manasa* slowed almost to a halt.

The dinghy, propelled by an outboard, raced out to them. Guy at the helm and Marie-France in the bow, smiling a welcome. They circled in front of *Manasa* and slowed and Guy called out, "Follow me."

Five minutes later they were secure to a mooring close in to the beach and Guy was accepting a cold beer from Ramesh and assuring him that the mooring was attached by a one inch chain to a five ton concrete block, that the nearest coral head was fifty yards away and that *Manasa* was as safe as a baby in a cot.

After the introductions Kirsty's first question was about the *Jaloud*. Her face fell when Guy told her that she had left the day before for Poivre, two hundred miles away, but she brightened when he explained they were staying a few days on Poivre and nearby islands and then definitely going on to Farquhar and Aldabra.

She quickly brought them up to date and told them with some apologies about her real reason for being in the Seychelles.

Ramesh offered to head out immediately in pursuit but Guy advised against it. In a boat like *Manasa* the passage would take at least twenty-four hours, and they would reach dangerous waters during the night. The best time to leave was early afternoon. Besides, one day would make no difference and they absolutely had to have dinner ashore and see the island. In the morning if Cady could wake up at dawn

he would take him out and try to find him a sailfish. Kirsty turned to look at Cady. Before he could open his mouth she said, "It's OK. Of course I'm impatient, but I have to live with that. It could take weeks – months Go get your sailfish, Cady."

17

Cady closely watched the dark sail glide up fifty yards behind the boat. He heard Guy's voice behind him, quiet but high-pitched with excitement.

"If he takes it let him run. I'll tell you when to strike."

Cady nodded, feeling his heart beat faster

He was sitting in a fighting chair at the stern of Guy's cabin cruiser and he hoped that he was finally going to catch a sailfish. Twice in the last three hours he had come close, but both times due to his impatience the hook had failed to set.

The sail curved back and forth behind the lure, just like a sleek yacht tacking across the wind, then it moved forward and disappeared and, in the next second, the huge drum reel between Cady's thighs began silently to run out

"Wait!" Guy cautioned, and then began quietly counting. Cady's thumb was poised on the reel's brake button, the short rod pointing horizontally over the stern.

". . . eight, nine, ten – strike!"

Cady flicked the button and snapped the rod back across his left shoulder.

"Jeeezuz!" The word erupted as a hundred yards behind the boat the sailfish came out of the water to twice its own length, then tail-walked across the wake before crashing back in a great shower of spray.

"A beauty!" Guy enthused "Keep her tight."

Cady wound in, feeling the tension in his left hand gripping the rod He was connected to that great fish by a nylon line which would break under a fifty pound strain. Twice more the sailfish jumped and ran and each time Cady had to let it go, taking yards of line with it.

But then it tired and slowly he reeled it in. Pumping the rod back and winding in on the down stroke. After twenty

minutes he could see its shape behind the boat, then Guy was pulling on a pair of old leather gloves. He moved past Cady and opened a hinged section of the transom. Then he reached forward and grabbed the wire trace.

"OK, I've got her!"

Cady put down the rod and stood up and watched as Guy hauled in the last few feet. He could see the long pointed bill and under its base the bright red of the lure.

"Hold the trace," Guy called, and Cady picked up the slack. Then Guy reached out with his right hand and gripped the bill, got his other hand on it and gave a mighty heave.

The head of the fish appeared through the transom gate, but most of its body and wildly flapping tail were still in the water.

"Hell! Give me a hand," Guy grunted.

Cady reached forward but Guy cried, "No! Get a cloth. It's like sand paper. You'll strip your hands."

Cady quickly found a cloth, wrapped it round the base of the bill and gripped with both hands. Then Guy called, "One, two, three – heave!"

For a moment the fish stuck in the gate, then abruptly it slid through and Guy and Cady collapsed on their backsides on either side of the flapping body.

Cady rolled away in alarm and scrambled to his feet. Guy lay where he had fallen. He was making strange noises and in a panic Cady thought he was hurt. But then he realised the noises were gurgling laughter, and he joined in.

The sailfish was about seven feet long and their heave had slid it half way into the cabin. Still laughing Guy got to his feet and pulled it back into the cockpit and the sunlight.

"Now watch!" he instructed urgently.

Slowly the sailfish began to glow and glisten in a myriad shades of blue. Cady watched in disbelief. He could not conceive that a single colour could have such variety or luminosity.

It only lasted a minute and then faded to a dull blue-black.

Guy was looking at Cady, who shook his head in awe. "In my life," he said, "I never seen the like. What happened?"

Guy shrugged. "It's when it dies. The old people say it's

the soul going out of it – going to heaven. They say that of all the fish only the sailfish go to heaven and the light there is the same as what you just saw."

"It's almost a pity to catch them."

Guy shook his head. "Out here we eat everything we catch, it's not just sport." He tapped it with his foot. "This one I'll salt and then smoke – delicious, and lasts for ever." He looked out over the side of the boat towards the distant island, and then at his watch.

"Come on. It's an hour's run back – and we've got enough."

He went to the wheel and pushed the throttle and the boat picked up speed. Meanwhile with great difficulty Cady extracted the hook from the rim of the fish's mouth, then tidied up the gear and the cockpit. He was a little puzzled. Earlier they had caught a selection of wahoo, dorado, tuna and barracuda, and Guy had used the gaff to bring them all aboard.

When he joined him beside the wheel he asked: "Why didn't you gaff it?"

"It's sort of tradition and cosmetic," Guy answered. "It's one of the few fish that sportsmen like to stuff and hang on the wall. The gaff can cut them up too much. I don't care to stuff anything but somehow I prefer not to mark them up." He grinned. "Maybe it's a bit sentimental."

Cady was silent for a while watching the blur of green on the far horizon, then he said, "Guy thanks a million. It was a hell of an experience."

"You're welcome. Anyway, like I said we eat everything up one way or another We have eight plantation workers and what they don't eat we dry and salt and send to Mahé."

There was another silence, then Guy began talking of Lascelles. Over dinner the night before he had heard the whole story and he was clearly worried. He had known Lascelles many years and he thought eventually the man would resort to violence, if Kirsty went through with her plan to 'haunt' him.

Cady was sanguine. He still bore the marks from Lascelles but he explained to Guy, as he had to Kirsty, the circumstances of the fight. If Lascelles wanted violence then he would get it.

Guy nodded. "It sounds like him, and no doubt you won't let it happen again." He paused, then said soberly, "Trouble is, Cady, that aboard *Jaloud* Lascelles always carries a variety of guns . . ."

"Oh yeah! You think he'd resort to that?"

"You have to understand," Guy said thoughtfully, "like all bullies, Lascelles is basically a coward. I remember the first time he came to Bird, a few years back. He had a girlfriend with him – English. Strangely enough she was a pleasant girl. They'd been together quite a while. He wasn't drinking as much then. Well one afternoon she was swimming. He was on the beach. She was about seventy yards out goggling over the coral heads. A big shark came along – hammerhead about twenty feet. That's no problem. We have lots of sharks in these waters but they don't attack people, except maybe on the far outer islands like Aldabra. No one can remember anybody being taken by a shark on the plateau islands. Hell, the kids here don't even get out of the water when they see one. But of course she didn't know that, and she panicked. In her frenzy to get ashore she got cramp in the leg. I was in the house and heard her screams. When I got to the beach Lascelles was standing there rigid. His face was white – white with fear."

"What happened?"

Guy shrugged. "I went in and got her out. She was half drowned but recovered all right. She refused even to talk to Lascelles or leave on his boat the next day. She stayed for a month until the inter-island schooner arrived." He smiled. "She was a pretty girl, and very grateful, and my being a bachelor then she was very welcome company." He turned serious again. "But the point is it showed Lascelles in his true colours – he's a coward. Trouble is, if you corner a coward he'll use anything to hand – even a gun."

There was a silence while Cady digested that, then Guy said, "I didn't say anything last night – didn't want to alarm the others. Do you think it will make Kirsty reconsider?"

Slowly Cady shook his head and Guy asked, "What about you, and Ramesh . . . and the girl?"

Cady thought about it. "It won't put me off, I'll stick with

her, an' strangely I think Ramesh will. He's a curious guy. He looks kinda placid an' all but it's my guess he's got a lot of strength . . . an' character. Lani will stay with him. She's got no choice really; but even if she had I guess she'd stay . . . She's also got a lot of character."

"But you'll tell them that Lascelles is armed?"

Cady nodded. "It's only fair . . . but it sure changes the odds. You really think it's that dangerous? I mean those bird guys are gonna be around . . ."

Guy shrugged. "Not all the time. When they get down to the outer islands they'll have to camp ashore. There are no settlements. There will be periods when Lascelles can leave them and take the boat away. If you stick with him that's when it's going to be dangerous."

At that moment Marie-France was standing in the middle of the bird colony with Kirsty, Ramesh and Lani As she talked loudly above the screaming din the others kept ducking their heads involuntarily as bird after bird swooped in, inches above, outraged at this intrusion.

She explained that sooty terns take a mate for life. Every year they return to the same tiny patch of sand to lay their eggs. In the interim it's believed they migrate as far as Australia or the Americas. The young birds don't mate until the third year and therein lay a mystery that ornithologists have been debating for years The terns, unlike seagulls, cannot alight on the sea because their feathers are not waxed. They only come on land to mate and rear their chicks. No pre-mated young terns are ever seen on land. Hence it is believed that the terns stay aloft, never touching ground, for the first three years of their lives.

Kirsty looked up at the wheeling mass and said, "I didn't know there were this many birds in the whole world."

Marie-France laughed. "There are other colonies where you're going." She swept an arm to encompass the two sandy acres. "Fifty years ago they used to collect 40,000 cases of eggs a season here. They're a great delicacy. If you take one egg the female lays a second, but no more. That means that in those days there must have been more than 10,000,000 birds! The people then were too greedy and began taking

the second eggs. The colony almost died out, but now it's increasing again. Those people with Lascelles estimated that we have almost 2,000,000 now."

At the mention of Lascelles Kirsty glanced at her watch.

"Don't worry," Marie-France said. "Guy promised to be back by noon. Come on, we'll go and find 'Esmerelda'. Actually it's a he – said to be one of the biggest and oldest tortoises in the world. At this time of the day he usually sleeps in the shade of the Causarina trees."

Half an hour later they stood on the beach and watched the cabin cruiser come into the anchorage. It first went alongside *Manasa* and they saw Cady transfer something from one boat to the other. Then they moved to another mooring. The plantation workers had all appeared and two of them slid the dugout into the water and paddled out.

As Marie-France saw them manhandle the long, dark fish she said with satisfaction, "Good. They got a sailfish. Cady will be pleased."

Ten minutes later they were admiring the catch laid out on the beach and listening to Cady describing in graphic detail his fight with the sailfish. Then Guy took Marie-France's arm and took her off to the house leaving the four of them on the beach.

Cady, his face now serious, said to Kirsty, "Out there fishin' Guy told me that Lascelles has one or more guns on his boat. He knows him well an' thinks that, if pushed enough, he might use them."

"Oh." Kirsty's face fell. "What about those bird people? Surely . . ."

"Apparently they won't always be around."

"Oh." She looked down at the sand, scuffed it with her bare toes.

"What are you suggesting?" Ramesh asked Cady with a stern frown. "That we abandon the whole thing?"

"Hell no!" Cady answered, surprised by the tone of his voice. "I'm just repeatin' what Guy told me. That's somethin' I had to do. It's a whole new ball game."

"You're right, Cady," Kirsty said thoughtfully. "Of course I want to go on – no matter what the dangers – but it's not fair

to drag you all into it. Ramesh it's your boat." She held up a hand as he started to speak. "Wait. I think you three should talk it over without me. If you decide to go straight on to Mombasa I'll understand. You can drop me off at Mahé and I'll try to find some other way . . . really I'll understand. It's a personal business to me I can't expect others to risk their lives." She turned away and started walking across the sand.

"Wait!" Ramesh called.

She stopped and turned.

"Come right back here " he said, and suddenly he was not the placid, overly courteous, even timid man they had all imagined. His voice rang with authority

"Kirsty! Come back here!"

Slowly she retraced her steps, wondering at the change in the man. He was like an emerging chrysalis. Ever since they had set sail from Mahé she had noticed his confidence. He remained ever courteous and considerate, but he was slowly dropping his cloak of diffidence. In spite of her anxiety she felt a growing admiration.

They stood in a circle. Ramesh looked at them all in turn, his head high, his back straight Then he said, "It is true The *Manasa* is my boat. I am the Captain the master. I am responsible for the boat and the safety of all those sailing in her. I take the decisions even though, as you all know, a short time ago I was an inexperienced *babu* I take the decisions. Is that not correct Cady?"

"Sure. But . . ."

"No 'buts' please." Ramesh held up a severe hand. "Of course I listen to advice I am not a dictator but I am knowing that on a boat only one man can be in charge, specially in conditions of hazard and danger and so on and so forth." He turned to Lani. "You are in a difficult position because you are not having a choice at this time."

Instantly Lani said, "I need no choice, Ramesh – you know that."

"Good." He turned to Kirsty. "So I have taken the decision. The *Manasa* will proceed to Poivre and stay in constant contact with *Jaloud.* If Cady wants to disembark at Mahé he . . ."

Cady's roar cut him off "Now wait a minute!" He took a

step forward, his face reddening with anger. "Who said any goddam thing 'bout gettin' off!"

Lani defused the situation. She started laughing. They looked at her in surprise and she laughed harder. Then she drew a breath and said, "You are all crazy. Nobody wants to give up or ever wanted to. You are going round in little circles saying the same things. Shall I get a Bible? Shall we all swear an oath of loyalty?"

They all smiled, and Kirsty said, "Guy was right, and Cady was right to warn us. It's better to know the worst."

"Anyway it's not so bad," Cady said. "The odds have been evened out a bit. I'll tell you about it on the boat." To Ramesh he said, "I never doubted you were the skipper an' in charge. I guess I've had ten times more experience on boats and if you ever ask my advice I'll give it – but only when you ask."

Ramesh ducked his head in acknowledgment. "I am knowing that Cady. It is a relief to me that you are on board." He glanced at his watch. "Now let us say goodbye to Guy and Marie-France. I would like to be under way by one o'clock."

18

The shot rang out and a spout of water erupted about ten yards beyond the floating bottle.

"It jumps!" Ramesh exclaimed. "It jumps in my hand!"

"Sure it does," Cady said patiently. "It's the recoil. Here, put your left hand on top of your right wrist to steady it like this. Aim again. Remember to imagine that the barrel is your finger. Point it at the target. Keep your arm stiff an' just squeeze the trigger real gentle."

They were standing on the stern of *Manasa* forty miles south-west of Bird Island. It was early evening and the wind had died away which it often does during the change over of monsoons. They had opened Jack Nelson's mysterious box half an hour before. Inside were several oil cloth bundles and a note. While Cady started to unwrap the bundles Ramesh read the note.

Dear Ramesh,
A couple of years ago a man I knew in the Navy was passing through the Seychelles on a round-the-world trip in a small ketch. He had been through some dicey waters in the East Indies and had acquired the enclosed for protection. He asked me to keep them for him while he spent a month cruising in the Amirantes. Unfortunately he hit a reef down there and was drowned. I had the box buried in the garden and had virtually forgotten it. The contents might come in useful if Lascelles cuts up rough.
Bon voyage.
Yours aye,
Jack.

"Goddam!"

Startled Ramesh looked up to see Cady hefting what he instantly recognised as a weapon.

"Sten gun Mark 2," Cady said excitedly. "Old, but it looks in good shape."

Quickly they had unwrapped the other bundles and laid the contents on the saloon table. Then Cady took stock. "The Sten plus six loaded magazines; a Walther P1 pistol and six loaded clips." He had grinned up at Ramesh. "This evens things up a bit."

Gingerly Ramesh had picked up the Sten gun and asked, "Do you know how to use them?"

"Sure. A lot of oil men are gun enthusiasts. The Walther is straightforward. I've never fired a Sten but I've fired a Stirling and a Grease gun. The principle's the same."

Ramesh had never even held a gun in his life and Cady had suggested that they use one clip of the 9mm ammunition to give him some practice with the Walther. He was tempted to do the same thing himself with the Sten gun but each magazine contained only thirty-two rounds and, on automatic, that was gone in a two-second burst. He decided to keep all six magazines just in case.

Kirsty and Lani were standing on the coach roof, interested observers and at the next shot they shouted and clapped their hands. The water spout was only a couple of feet past and to the left.

"Good!" Cady said and bent down to pick up the ejected cartridge from the deck.

The next shot was over again and far to the right and Ramesh was crestfallen.

"You snatched the trigger," Cady said sternly. "The barrel moved just before the shot. Squeeze it Ramesh – like you'd pick up an over-ripe plum."

The next shot was very close, the bottle almost obscured by spray.

He never did hit the bottle, but the last four shots were close and Cady was well pleased.

Ramesh was not. "Damn!" he muttered as the sound of the last round rolled away across the empty sea.

"Don't worry," Cady said encouragingly. "For a first try it

was damn good – an' any one of those last four would have downed a man Besides, a hand gun is for use close up. You hit a guy anywhere with that from five yards an' he'll know all about it."

Ramesh looked down at the gun in his hand. The blue-black metal. The stocky serrated grip and the slim barrel with its wedged foresight. The weight felt good in his hand – balanced. He tried to imagine the sensation of pointing it at a man and squeezing the trigger. No spouts of water or broken glass but torn flesh and smashed bone and blood. He wondered if he could do it.

Cady was reading his thoughts. "If someone was tryin' to kill you Ramesh – you'd do it – bet your ass!"

Ramesh nodded grimly. "Yes I believe it. Have you ever done it?"

"Only once," Cady said. "I was on a supply ship in Jakarta Harbour. Because of congestion we had to wait weeks to unload. Those days there were a lot of robberies from ships – pirating really. They'd come out quietly in the middle of the night, hook on with cloth covered grapples an' swarm over the side. We took turns standin' guard with a Colt 1911 – big .45 that would stop an elephant. Well they came one night. I was dozin' off, got lucky an' just spotted some shadows at the stern rail. Hell, I really panicked. Just blazed away with the whole damn clip. They used damn great dugouts with five outboards on the back. They took off in a cloud of smoke."

"Do you think you killed one?"

"Who knows? There was a little blood on the rail. Guess I winged him."

"Hummm," Ramesh muttered thoughtfully, looking down at the pistol. He held it out to Cady who, with his finger, slowly pushed the barrel away to the side.

"Never point a gun at someone Ramesh."

"But it's empty."

"Sure, an' a lot of people have died from a gun they knew was empty."

He took the gun and clicked on the safety and released the clip.

"I'll give it a clean, an' the Sten. You did well Ramesh

Good shootin' for a first try." He looked at his watch. "Then I'm gonna get a coupla hours sleep before I take the watch."

Ramesh had divided up the night watches between himself and Cady. Despite protests he had taken the tiring dog watch for himself. Midnight to four in the morning.

He moved up to the wheel and pushed the throttle and *Manasa* picked up speed and slid through the flat sea towards the Amirantes.

The wind increased just after three in the morning. Cady woke as soon as the engine was throttled back. His first thought was that something was wrong, but then he heard Ramesh moving forward on the deck above him and guessed that he was putting up sail. He contemplated going up to help, but decided against it. Ramesh might think he lacked confidence in him. Then he faintly heard Ramesh call something and the boat turned slightly to a new course, so either Lani or Kirsty was at the helm.

He looked at the luminous dial of his watch and decided to try to get a little more sleep before relieving Ramesh. He turned over in the narrow bunk and pounded his pillow and tried to settle down.

But sleep eluded him, and his thoughts, as they had done frequently of late, turned to Lani.

He knew he was falling in love and it confused and worried him. That evening they had eaten dinner on the afterdeck: one of Dave's pork pies with salad, preceded by smoked sailfish, which Guy had given them from a previous catch. Ramesh and Kirsty had dominated the conversation speculating about the habits and lives of sooty terns and giant tortoises and whether animals can communicate and if they have feelings and so on. They were very relaxed with each other and had Cady not been so preoccupied with Lani he would have noticed the affection that had grown between them. Lani was merely picking at her food.

"The pie's great," he said. "Don't you like it?"

She looked up and smiled slightly. "I'm sure it's good. I am not very used to it though. Where I come from we cook pigs differently."

"Sure. Western food must be real strange for you. Hell I don't mind eatin' Chinese food every damned day."

"No," she said firmly. "I must get used to it. I must get used to lots of new things."

He had been about to ask her what she foresaw for herself in the future, but held back the question. None of them had much idea on that score, particularly Lani.

She had a curious way of looking at him. Never a full, direct look, but kind of snatched glances. In any other girl he would have thought she was being coy – flirting even – but he knew it was not the case. It was as though she was almost frightened of him. He noticed that when she spoke to Ramesh or Kirsty she looked them straight in the eyes.

It puzzled him. He pounded the pillow again and tried to get his great length comfortable, then sighed and looked at his watch. Three thirty. No point in trying to sleep now. He rolled out of the bunk and pulled on a pair of denim shorts. He would see if Ramesh wanted coffee or anything.

He padded barefoot down the corridor past the silent engine room and entered the dark saloon. He was about to go up the companionway when he heard the voices. They were very low, almost whispers but the wind was astern carrying them clearly to him.

"I like her very much Lani. I'm surprised you noticed. Is it so obvious?"

Her voice was fainter. She was obviously sitting on the stern rail.

"In a way, Ramesh. I know you very well now. I notice the way you look at her. How you become attentive to her. How you are more alert when she talks to you – it is not unnatural."

Cady froze where he was, a foot on the bottom step.

Ramesh's voice was underlaid by a note of concern. "Do you mind, Lani? Does it bother you?"

"Oh no." She said it lightly. "I think she is a very good woman, and she feels the same as you do. I can see it." A pause, then, "But I worry for you Ramesh. She is obsessed. She has no proof that her son is alive but she is positive."

"So am I," Ramesh said simply.

"I know. I also. But I think because I want to believe it – for her sake. Back there on the island when Cady talked about the guns you were angry at the thought of giving up the search. I feel you will get the same obsession. It is not good. What if the boy is indeed dead? How long will you search for him?"

"I don't know Lani, or what will happen in the weeks ahead, but I shall be fatalistic. Let happen what will happen." A pause. "I too am worried but about Cady."

"Why?"

"Well . . . well they were together you know He likes her very much. Maybe loves her."

"No." She was quietly emphatic. "He likes her, yes, but they are not lovers. There is something – a kind of closeness – but they will not be lovers. I think it is like I feel for you but the other way round."

There was a silence except for the creaking of the sails, then Ramesh murmured, "But he is so handsome . . . so virile . . . it must be hard for a woman not to be very attracted . . . don't you think?"

"Oh no. I don't think so."

"Really?"

"Really. Sometimes you forget Ramesh that I am Chinese. We have different ideas about what is attractive. We see many westerners as coarse and gross, with hairy bodies like apes. When the first ones came to China they were called *fang gweilo*. It means foreign devil - or barbarian. We find it takes a long time to get used to them. I mean I can hardly look at Cady's face.

"But it is still bruised."

"It's not that. I see his blond eyebrows and long hair like an albino, and the hair on his face when he doesn't shave sometimes – and on his chest and arms. Oh, of course I will get used to it," she giggled, "just like pork pies."

From the tone of his voice Ramesh was obviously intrigued. "But you like him?"

"Oh yes. Very much. He has good character and much kindness . . . but he is so very ugly."

If their ears had been sharper they would have heard the single word muttered in the saloon:

"Goddam!"

And if their eyes could have pierced the darkness and the wooden coaming, they would have seen Cady's face – split by an enormous grin.

19

They passed the south-eastern tip of Daros two hours after dawn. Cady had the watch and as the others were all asleep he lashed the wheel and took a bearing. Then he altered course a few degrees further south. The wind had freshened to a force four and *Manasa* bowled along at a steady six knots.

Cady was at peace with the world. He recorded the change of course in the log book and calculated that they would reach Poivre in the early afternoon and the 'haunting' would finally begin. He was looking forward to it. In a strange way he was anxious to see Lascelles again. He would not provoke anything but he was impatient to be in the vicinity of the man. He wanted to watch him in the way that a hunter will stalk his quarry knowing that the moment of decision will surely come.

He was no longer confused about his emotions. They were crystal clear. He had a great affection for Kirsty and enormous admiration.

He was in love with Lani. It felt good to have things clear in his mind. He felt like a runner who had just finished a long and gruelling race and is relaxing under a hot shower: tired but warm and with the tension flowing out of him. He had seen and done much in his twenty-six years. For the past eight years he had worked hard and travelled the world and known excitement and sometimes fear. But he had never known love as he now experienced it, and it was as though he had reached a pinnacle and for the first time was breathing fresh and pure air.

He heard a noise in the saloon and then Kirsty's face appeared in the companionway. Her hair was sleep-tousled and she had a hand over her yawning mouth.

"Morning, Cady," she mumbled. "You up there alone?"

"Yeah. Sleep well?"

She smiled sleepily. "And how! Where are we?"

"Just passin' Daros. I figure we reach Poivre in about six hours."

"That's fast isn't it?"

"Sure is. We picked up a wind in the night."

She moved up the steps and looked over the side at the island a couple of miles away: a line of coconut trees, a white beach and nothing else to be seen.

"Breakfast Cady? Bacon and eggs and coffee?"

"Great!" He was suddenly ravenous.

"Shall I make it for the others?"

"No, they were both awake till after four. Let them sleep."

Fifteen minutes later they were eating at the folding table on the stern deck. The wind was so steady on the beam that *Manasa* sailed herself.

Kirsty was wide awake now, her hair blowing in the breeze, her eyes sparkling. She kept glancing at Cady as he voraciously demolished four eggs and half a dozen rashers of bacon.

When he finally wiped his plate clean with a piece of bread she poured him more coffee and asked:

"So tell me?"

"What?" he mumbled through his last mouthful

"What happened? You look like a cat that swallowed an entire cage full of canaries."

He looked at her closely and she smiled and said, "Let me guess. You're in love. It's not me so it must be Lani." She laughed at the almost guilty look on his face.

"She thinks I'm ugly!" He said it as if in explanation

Kirsty nodded. "I know, she told me last night."

"She did!"

"Sure. After dinner when we went to bed we had a long talk. Sort of woman's talk. I guess she needed to "

"Go on." He was leaning forward across the table.

She shook her head. "That's all. We talked about Ramesh and you and . . . well woman's talk." She paused. "I'm glad for you Cady – and for me It kind of clears the air for us. Remember when we talked in the hospital in Mahé? Well, I was still a bit worried about sidetracking you from your career or something." Her eyes crinkled as she smiled. "Well

now I won't feel guilty. Instead of being nervous about the depth of your feelings I can relax knowing that I've got a truly good friend."

He nodded soberly and reached out and squeezed her hand "I know what you mean. It feels good "

She smiled again. "But be cautious Cady. She's a complicated girl . . . and apart from anything else, she's a virgin."

"Yes? She told you that?"

"She did. Also that she offered herself to Ramesh in gratitude and during twenty days alone on the boat he never laid a finger on her."

Cady digested that and then said, with reverence, "He's one hell of a guy. One in a million."

She nodded in agreement and Cady said, "Well I haven't bin havin' any heart to hearts with him but I overheard them talkin' in the dog watch. He's pretty stuck on you."

She sighed and turned her head and looked at the green smudge receding on the horizon.

"I know. I can sense it."

"And how do you feel?"

She turned her face back to him. He got the impression of defiant resolution.

"Oh Cady, sure I feel something. It's a bit frightening. I keep seeing more of his character every day, and I like what I see. I feel an empathy and it grows stronger. I don't want it to happen. I'm going to keep a lid on it; clamp the thing tight. I'm not going to let any emotions hinder me. Not until I know what happened to Garret. I didn't come all this way to fall in love or even have a pleasant but casual affair. I came to find my son."

"OK. But meanwhile your life goes on; you can't shut out everything else. It's obvious what you feel for the guy."

"Yes, but like Lani my prime emotion is gratitude. He's helping me just as you are. All other feelings I might have are locked away – and they'll stay locked away till this thing is finished."

She had a challenging look in her eyes.

He said quietly, "OK, Kirsty. Ramesh is an honest guy but don't get a helluva surprise if he picks the lock."

Kirsty did not answer; she was being forced to admit to herself that he had already picked the lock.

The wind increased again just before noon. Ramesh came on deck and looked up at the sky. There were trails of thin cloud very high. He asked Cady, who was at the wheel: "The barometer's started to drop. What do you think?"

Cady also studied the high clouds and shrugged.

"South-east. Could be some kind of storm down Madagascar way. We might get the edge. We're too far north to get caught in a hurricane or anything."

Ramesh went below, and Cady guessed he'd be studying his 'bible' on heavy weather procedure. He reappeared on deck twenty minutes later.

"Barometer's still dropping even faster. According to the notes Dave Thomas gave me they very occasionally get gale force winds as far north as Providence. The last time was ten years ago."

Cady slid him a look to see if he was nervous. There was no sign of it. He was gazing out at the sea, where small white-caps were already visible. *Vanua* heeled to a sudden gust, and Cady said, "Well, Providence is still a long way south of us. Guess we might get a force six or seven though."

Ramesh nodded and called down to Lani and Kirsty. When they came on deck he asked Lani to take the helm and Kirsty to start securing everything below. Then he and Cady set to reefing the mainsail.

By late afternoon the wind was gusting to forty knots and the sea had risen to long swells disturbed by a discordant chop. It was flecked with spumed white-caps. The glass was still dropping. Ramesh and Cady had raised a storm jib and put another reef in the mainsail. *Vanua* was now surging and bucking in the rising sea.

Cady had been impressed by Ramesh's preparations. He might be a novice but he was methodical and quietly confident. First they had rigged a line fore and aft above the dog house, and clipped on four life lines. Life-jackets were placed within easy reach in the cockpit. Two of them had automatic lights attached and Ramesh tested them. Then, while Cady checked that everything was secure in the engine room,

Ramesh prepared a canvas sea anchor, attached it to a short length of chain and then twenty fathoms of rope. He then went around checking stays and deck fittings.

When Cady came out of the engine room he looked at the barometer. It was still falling. He turned to see Kirsty coming out of the fo'c'sle. She was very pale, holding on to a grab rail as the boat bucked and twisted.

"You all right, Kirsty?"

She shook her head mournfully. "I feel lousy. I took some pills but they don't help. It's really rough, Cady."

"Yeah, an' it's gonna get rougher. Listen, the best thing you can do is to stay in your bunk." He pushed past her and made sure that her bunk's lee board was secure.

She tumbled into it and asked, "Is it dangerous?"

He shook his head confidently. "Hell no. We'll have an uncomfortable night, but this should blow itself out by morning."

By early evening they were running before a force eight with just the storm jib up and *Manasa* rolling wildly The barometer continued dropping over one millibar an hour and Ramesh and Cady held a conference in the cockpit.

"There is much, and unfortunately varied, advice about what to do in these conditions," Ramesh said. "Everything from warps astern to a sea anchor from the bow. What do you think?"

Cady looked back at the huge waves rolling in astern They were surprisingly close together and each one lifted *Manasa* high; on occasion making her surf down to a shuddering impact.

"Me, I'd go for the sea anchor off the bow," Cady said. "I'd feel happier with her nose pointed into the wind and the engine tickin' over." He gestured astern "With those waves we face the danger of being pitch poled."

Ramesh nodded in satisfaction. "I agree. Let's do it."

By nightfall they were riding bow to the wind and waves, bouncing up and down like a giant cork. Very uncomfortable, but fairly stable. Ramesh and Cady sat in the cockpit wearing life-jackets clipped to life-lines They had rigged a low canvas dodger and, although a lot of water was coming in over the bow, they were reasonably dry. Lani came up

the companionway clutching a plate of sandwiches. She sat next to Ramesh and he made her struggle into a life-jacket and then clipped it to a life-line

"Did you eat?" Cady asked, and she shook her head

"I feel a bit sick. But not so bad."

"How's Kirsty?" Ramesh asked.

"She's been sick twice, but seems a bit better now. She's drowsy – I think from the pills."

"Good. Maybe she'll sleep."

The storm reached its peak around midnight. Lani was below with Kirsty. Ramesh and Cady remained in the cockpit. They had debated whether one of them should try and get some rest but decided against it. If anything gave in the night it might take too long to get on deck to help.

It was just before one o'clock when a huge sea came over the bows, ripping away the canvas dodger and soaking the two men. Cady thought he had heard a crack up front and decided to investigate. Clutching every available hand-hold he edged forward. Ramesh moved to the side of the dog house, watching.

At the same time below Kirsty had woken from a snatch of sleep and, with nausea welling up inside her, decided she must get some fresh air.

On deck Cady was on his knees inspecting the cleat holding the sea anchor. It seemed to be all right.

He turned and gave Ramesh the thumbs up and then behind him saw Kirsty's head appear over the dog house.

"Life-jacket!" he shouted, as the prow lifted sharply, then he hung on as a wall of water swept over him. When it cleared he felt his guts contract. Kirsty had been swept back, one leg and half her body over the stern rail, one arm gripped round a stanchion. Her wet hair plastered and obscured her face. Ramesh was moving rapidly towards her like a crab, arm outstretched; then *Manasa* shuddered again; another wall of water and Kirsty was gone and Ramesh was lying on his side next to the mizzen mast. He was on his knees in a second and on his feet a second later. Mesmerised, Cady watched as he unclipped his life-line, took two short steps and dived over the stern.

Then Cady moved. His right hand quickly unravelled the

sea anchor line. He felt *Manasa* lift and turn as the pressure was gone. She rolled until Cady thought they were going over, but then, with a shudder of disapproval, she swung back up.

Cady scuttled back to the cockpit screaming for Lani, but she was already pulling herself up the companionway.

He pushed a life-jacket into her arms and the end of a life-line. Then he grabbed the wheel, unhooked the thong and slammed the throttle forward. Over his shoulder he shouted,

"Go up to the mainmast. Put your arms and legs around it and hang on for your life. Look for a light – at the crests of the waves." He pointed, fine on the starboard bow. "That direction."

She edged quickly past him, paused as the stern lifted violently, made a dash for the mast, reached it in three strides and wrapped herself around it. Cady eased the throttle slightly trying to get *Manasa* to follow the momentum of the waves. He had no illusions. Unless they spotted them within two minutes it would be too late. In such conditions, combined with the terror of the event, a person could drown even with a life-jacket – and Kirsty did not have one. He prayed that Ramesh had found her and thanked God that he was wearing a life-jacket with a light.

Two hundred yards off the starboard bow Kirsty could see that light intermittently. She could also hear Ramesh's anguished voice.

"Kirsty! Swim to the light. The light!"

She saw it flash again and moved her arms. They felt leaden. She opened her mouth to shout and it filled up with water and then her head was under and she felt the panic rising through her like a hot blade. Her face cleared the surface and she saw the light, closer now. They were in the trough of the same wave. She kicked towards it and screamed: "Ramesh!"

Then she was under again, with more water in her mouth and the crystal clear thought that she was going to die. She could not feel her arms or legs. She felt a lassitude.

Her mind screamed "No! No!" and she kicked, and there was the light and suddenly a hand gripping her arm and Ramesh's exhausted voice in her ear.

"Turn, Kirsty. Hold your arms out Put your head back against me. Don't struggle! You must not struggle!"

On *Manasa* Lani's arms and legs ached as she clung to the mast. Every few seconds water sprayed over her, obscuring her vision, and she sobbed with frustration. She willed herself to be calm Closed her eyes tight for a second then peered forward Nothing but blackness and spray She shifted her gaze a few points to starboard as more water came over her; but had she seen something? Yes, it was there again A light. She pointed and screamed and then saw it again. So did Cady.

"Get back here!" he shouted, and reached out an arm She turned, gauged the movement of the boat, then ran to it.

"You have to take the helm," Cady said urgently "It's one thing to find them, another to get them aboard. I have to launch the dinghy. Hold her steady like that Keep watching the light."

She gripped the wheel and he leaned inside the companionway and flicked on the lights; then edged up to the dinghy on the foredeck With one hand he started unlashing it. With the other he unscrewed the air vent of one chamber. The air hissed out until it was half deflated. Then he screwed the air vent tight. He eased open the fore-hatch and pulled out a coil of heavy rope and attached it to the painter

Fighting against the wind he heaved the dinghy over the lee side and saw with relief that it landed right side up. Then, with the end of the rope gripped tight in his hand, he scrambled to the stern, passed the rope through a fair lead and then round the mainsail winch. The dinghy bounced, twenty yards astern.

"Right," he grunted, coming up behind Lani. "I'll take her. You'll have to work that winch when I tell you. Where's that light?"

She pointed and he saw with satisfaction that it was only fifty yards ahead, just off the starboard bow. He knew precisely what he had to do and that he might only have one chance. He pushed up the throttle and turned the wheel. He would pass them slowly on the weather side and then take off the power. The line and the dinghy would then drift on to them. They would have to pull themselves to the dinghy and

scramble on. By half deflating one chamber he had made it easier.

"Lani, there's a big torch in the saloon locker – please!" A minute later, in its beam, he saw the two heads. One dark, the other blonde. His relief was tinged by the knowledge that they would be exhausted and the hard part was coming.

He concentrated now on the waves, using the wheel and the throttle to edge up wind. The light disappeared from his view under the bow, then it was alongside and he saw they were rising on the same wave, and he was taking off the power and screaming,

"Ramesh! Rope astern. Grab it! Get the dinghy. Starboard side!"

He saw an arm wave as they slid past and he moved the gear lever into reverse and revved the engine briefly. Then he grabbed the torch and trained in on the looping line. Two more waves. He saw the light close to the line and then it tightened and he let out a whoop.

"Start winching in, Lani! Real slow."

She swung the handle and Cady watched as the dinghy edged towards the light and the two heads. He noticed with relief that the wind was slackening. The dinghy and the light came together.

"I hope he has the strength left," Cady murmured. Ramesh had. They watched as he manhandled Kirsty's inert form over the starboard chamber and then hauled himself in.

"OK, Lani. Winch in. Slow and steady. Now listen – there's still a difficult bit. When they're close I'm gonna have to throw them two life-lines and another life-jacket to be sure. I might have to jump in the dinghy myself to help them out."

Lani looked up at him and shook her head. "You know that's stupid. You mustn't leave the boat. If something happens I wouldn't know what to do . . . I'll jump in and take the lines and jackets. Don't argue, Cady. You know I'm right."

He did not argue. She was right.

She timed it perfectly, waiting until the dinghy rose under the port quarter; leaping out clutching the jacket and trailing the two life-lines, and her own.

She landed next to Ramesh, who was cradling Kirsty in his arms. She appeared barely conscious.

With life-lines attached to all three, Cady breathed easier The wind was abating now and the sea moderating.

He manoeuvred *Manasa* at a fine angle into the wind, looped the wheel and pulled the dinghy up the lee side Ramesh and Lani were on either side of Kirsty. As the dinghy rose on a wave they lifted her. Cady reached down, got his hands under her arms, and in one movement swung her aboard.

Lani came next, and finally Ramesh, who was shaking with relief and shock.

Two hours later, with the wind down to a steady force five and a little sail up, Cady and Ramesh sat in the cockpit drinking coffee.

"We were damn lucky," Cady muttered. "Nine times out of ten, in conditions like that, we'd have lost you."

Ramesh merely nodded. He seemed too tired even to talk, but he had refused to go below.

"Hell of a thing you did," Cady said. "You must have known the odds."

Ramesh raised his head. "Yes. But what could I do? I am the Captain, she is my responsibility."

Cady realised that he was not being modest. It was that simple. He meant it.

Lani came up the companionway and said, "Ramesh, she wants to talk to you. She's fine. She drank some soup."

Ramesh went below and Lani sat in the cockpit opposite Cady. "What a night," she muttered.

He smiled. "In a way it's good It brought us all together. I guess sharing terror does that."

She was seated with her shoulder hunched against the side of the dog house. She looked impossibly frail, and he remembered her leaping across six feet of foaming sea into the dinghy.

"Lani I want to tell you something."

"What?"

"It's an expression we use on the rigs . . . You got balls all the way down to your toes."

"But Cady, I'm a girl."

"Yeah . . . don't I know it."

In the fo'c'sle Ramesh sat on the bunk opposite Kirsty. She reached out and picked up his hand.

"I don't want to talk Ramesh. I don't know the words to thank you. Maybe one day. I'm going to sleep now. I wanted to touch you – to hold on to you for a little while."

He said nothing. He sat there in the tiny cabin, and she closed her eyes and slept. He stayed for an hour, her hand in his, watching her face in the dim light.

They saw the two sets of masts while they were still far out to sea. Cady studied them through the binoculars and announced, "One is *Jaloud*. The other a schooner - probably an inter-island trader."

Half an hour later they started the motor and dropped the sails. Kirsty took the helm while Ramesh studied the chart and Cady pumped up the rubber dinghy. As they approached the fairway Ramesh took back the helm and Kirsty picked up the binoculars. The *Jaloud* was only a quarter of a mile away, anchored close in to the beach with the big schooner on its starboard quarter. She could recognise Lascelles and Carlo on deck sitting at a table on the stern. She panned the binoculars along the beach. Three dugouts and two rubber dinghies. Behind them in the Palm and Causarina trees she could make out a cluster of thatched roofed buildings.

She put the binoculars down and said to Ramesh, "Can you anchor just with Lani?"

He glanced at her and nodded. "I'll put her close in off his port side."

She turned and called to Cady, "Let's go below for a while."

Carlo and Lascelles watched with interest as *Manasa* crept in towards the beach. The remains of a meal and several bottles of beer were scattered on the table. Carlo gave a low whistle when he saw the girl in the bikini move up to the forepeak and loosen the anchor. As they drew level about forty yards away Lascelles stood up and called,

"Hey! You're a bit close."

He saw the helmsman wave a deprecating hand and call out something to the girl A moment later the anchor splashed into the water.

In *Manasa*'s saloon Kirsty waited until Ramesh turned off the engine, then she walked up on deck. She saw Lascelles and Carlo at *Jaloud*'s rail, visually measuring the distance between the two boats. Lascelles looked up and saw her. His eyes dropped back to the water and then, had he been an actor, he would have been fired for his massive double-take.

"Lascelles! Where's my son?"

His jaw dropped, then his mouth worked and he was about to say something when Cady appeared behind her.

"Where's my son?" she repeated.

Lascelles took a deep breath and glanced at Carlo, then he said, "I told you woman. Your son's dead. What the hell are you doing here?"

The two boats had drifted closer and were now about thirty yards apart, their sterns forming a sixty degree angle. Keeping her eyes locked on his Kirsty walked to the stern to be closer. She had no need to shout.

"Lascelles, I came here to ask you that question and I'm going to stay with you like glue till you tell me where my son is."

Both Lascelles and Carlo were looking at her with awesome fascination, as though she was an exhibit in a zoo the patch of water between them the bars.

Lascelles was the first to react. He leaned out over the rail, his bearded chin jutting towards her.

"You're fucking crazy!" he hissed. "Your kid's dead. You hear me—dead!"

Kirsty said nothing. She reached behind her and dragged up a canvas chair, sat down and crossed her legs. Her eyes never left Lascelles' face.

After a minute under this impassive gaze he snorted derisively and turned to look at Cady who was leaning back against the main mast, arms folded.

Lascelles grinned, nudged Carlo and called out, "Hey pretty boy, you come for some more medicine?"

Cady remained motionless His voice was quiet but it carried. "I ain't startin' nothin'."

"You better not," Carlo sneered. "There's no hospital in this place."

A man had appeared on the beach wearing faded shorts and a singlet. He pulled one of the dinghies into the water, climbed in and rowed out to *Manasa*. As he pulled alongside and shipped the oars he looked up and said,

"Henri Daubin. I'm the manager here. Welcome to Poivre."

Ramesh took the painter and secured it while introducing himself, then said: "Come aboard – would you like a drink?"

He climbed up easily. A small, dark, lithe man almost bald apart from a narrow monk's fringe. He was introduced to the others and accepted a Scotch.

"You are on holiday? – a cruise?" he asked, taking a proffered chair.

"In a way," Ramesh said. Then with a glance at Kirsty added "We came to talk to Lascelles. Kirsty here's son was supposedly lost off Lascelles' yacht a few months ago. She doesn't believe it."

"Aah!" Daubin nodded. "I know the story."

"You do?" Kirsty asked in surprise.

Daubin gestured at the schooner.

"*La Belle Vue* came in a couple of days ago from Mahé. We are isolated in these islands but it's amazing how news travels. I heard the story of the woman looking for her son, and of the big blond man fighting with Lascelles." He glanced at Cady with an edge of sympathy. "You must understand that we on these islands are on contract. The workers move from island to island rarely returning to Mahé. We are a strange society and somehow news travels between us as though it was carried by the wind, even as far as Mauritius or the Comores a thousand miles away." He looked at Lani. "And you are the girl who stowed away in the Maldives." He smiled gently. "I do not blame you. I was there once."

His glass was empty and Ramesh refilled it.

"How long will you stay?" Daubin asked him.

"As long as *Jaloud*."

Kirsty leaned forward and explained her strategy. When she mentioned the 'haunting' of Lascelles, Daubin did not appear sceptical. He looked across at the *Jaloud*. Lascelles

and Carlo were back at the table now playing cards. They frequently glanced at the group on *Manasa*'s deck.

"Haunt him . . ." Daubin mused. "Well I have worked on the Amirante and other islands for thirty years and have seen strange things and people act in strange ways. Anything is possible. Anyway the *Jaloud* will leave tomorrow for Désnouf. Lascelles' passengers do not find our birds very interesting. After that they go to Farquhar and then Aldabra "

He drained his glass and stood up. "You have picked a good day to arrive. The schooner also brought news that the wife of one of our workers gave birth to a son – the first Tonight we celebrate and you are all welcome."

"Will Lascelles be there?" Kirsty asked.

"No," Daubin said firmly. "Last year he got drunk on the island and assaulted one of the workers Since then he has not been permitted to land. But the others will be there: the bird people, the crew from *La Belle Vue* and maybe Carlo It is tradition – all are invited who have permission to land."

"Thank you but I will stay aboard," Kirsty said

Daubin looked surprised, then his face showed understanding. "Ah yes . . . the haunting " He turned to Ramesh "Do you need anything? We are fortunate here, we have sufficient water . . a little brakish but drinkable "

"It is always good to top up," Ramesh said gratefully.

20

Ramesh stayed with Kirsty. She urged him to go to the party with Lani and Cady but he adamantly refused and in truth she had not urged him too strenuously.

They sat on deck with a drink watching the sunset. Earlier, during the afternoon Lani and Cady had gone fishing in the dinghy and among others caught a big red snapper. Kirsty had marinated it in lemon juice and herbs and just managed to squeeze it into the oven. Fish was her favourite food and as she had worked in the galley slicing vegetables to go with it her thoughts had gone back to New York and the occasional nights that she had gone for dinner with Larry to the little restaurant in the village where they ate king prawns flambéed in brandy. She wondered what Larry was doing now, and Irving and all the others. It had been one of the very rare occasions when New York had entered her mind and it did so with no hint of nostalgia.

Now, as she watched the sun go red and the sky assume its multicoloured mantle, New York and her past life were light years away.

She looked across at *Jaloud* – menacing with its black hull and stark raked masts.

Carlo sat alone on deck with a glass in his hand. Every time during the afternoon that she had seen Lascelles she had turned her gaze on him. Eventually he had gone below and not reappeared. In her guts she knew that she was getting to him. He was stuck on that boat and every time he was on deck he would see her watching him: a nemesis, poised and waiting. It made her feel good.

Beside her Ramesh sighed and inhaled the aroma drifting up the galley.

"I am feeling like a small boy waiting for a sweet."

She was about to make a reply when he suddenly called out, "Look!"

She lifted her head and saw the flash of green band across the horizon. Vivid, fleeting and heart-stopping. It was gone and for a moment she wondered if it had been there, but Ramesh was saying,

"A wish Kirsty! Make a wish!"

She did and he turned, his eyes excited and said, "It is an omen. It is good luck. Very, very rare." He smiled. "Of course I am knowing your wish . . I too made the same wish . . and also another. Who knows? Two may be granted."

Still unsettled and awed by what she had seen Kirsty unconsciously reached out and took his hand.

"What was your other wish Ramesh?"

The moment she said it she had doubts. She could have guessed his wish for she too had made a second one and she worried that her question might embarrass him. But Ramesh was not embarrassed. He squeezed her hand and said simply: "That after we find Garret we can in some way continue to be together."

She did not reply. She sat looking at the now dark horizon for a long time, then she withdrew her hand and stood up and went below to the galley.

She refused to let him do anything. She laid the table and opened the chilled wine and carried the food up and served it. When they were both seated, she facing *Jaloud*, Ramesh poured the wine, raised his glass and said,

"Book-keepers."

"What?"

"Book-keepers," he repeated. "Kirsty we were both book-keepers. Let us drink to them – all over the world – and wish that they in their lives could have one moment as serene as this."

She returned his smile and sipped her wine and looked about her. Apart from the boat forty yards away and its associations, the scene was a page out of the book of paradise. They were yards from a palm fringed beach dimly lit by the emerging moon, which also shimmered gently on the mirror surface of the water. Distant sounds floated out from the

trees: the syncopated music of the *Moutia* to which they had danced the *sega* in Mahé only three nights before. Above them the stars were amplified like diamonds scattered on black velvet. She was sitting on a yacht about to eat fish fresher than any city dweller could imagine. Opposite her was a man she found attractive and interesting – and yes, something more. A small kerosene lamp hanging from the boom cast a flickering light on to his brown aquiline face accentuating his slim nose and straight jaw; deepening his eyes and adding an air of mystery.

She smiled again and raised her glass and murmured "To book-keepers."

During the meal they were generally silent apart from frequent muffled sounds of appreciation from Ramesh.

Later she cleared away, again refusing his help, and brewed coffee and brought it up.

Then they talked, first sitting at the table and later standing at the stern rail. She rested against the back stay, he very close, legs apart, head lowered towards her.

They talked of their past lives. She told him of her marriage and Garret's childhood. He told her of his life in Bombay, the early prejudices directed at Anglo-Indians, his mother and her stoicism. He even told her about the girl from Goa and his feelings of helplessness and frustration in the face of bigotry and poverty. As he talked she realised once again that this man had changed even in the days she had known him. He was still courteous and a little diffident, but she could see the strength in him emerging. It was like a curtain being slowly pulled aside, at the unveiling of a portrait. At first she had been faintly amused at the rhythm and foibles of his accent. The 'I am knowing' instead of 'I know'. The absence of the apostrophe 's' in his speech. The 'and so on and so forth'. But now they seemed to give him dignity.

"Ramesh," she said. "I can't hide it. I feel so much for you. I think from the first day. It's grown ever since . . . goes on growing. Don't think I'm cold or even unaware of what you feel . . . it's just the time . . . the situation."

"I know. Do not worry about it Kirsty."

She drew a deep breath. "Ramesh, I truly thought until

these last few days that I could never really love again. I thought that the part of the brain . . . or whatever allows it, was dead. You proved that wrong . . . but I don't want to think about it, or after tonight even talk about it. I'm frightened to be weak, Ramesh. Frightened to think about myself . . . and not my son."

He told her that he understood – expected nothing less. Anyway, they were together and he was happy and confident about the future.

They could still hear the music from the shore. Kirsty looked at her watch. It was almost midnight.

"I'll go to bed."

"Thank you for a very delicious meal," he said formally and stood to one side.

As she passed him she paused and turned and laid a hand against his cheek in a gesture of affection.

She was about to go down the companionway when she heard the voices. She turned and saw two dark shapes on *Jaloux*'s deck. Lascelles was talking in a drunken slur.

"Well fucking go if you want to."

"I am," Carlo said defiantly. "The damn beer's finished. They'll have gallons of *calou* . . . an' that Chinese bitch . . . haven't had a slit-eye for years."

He dropped on to the dinghy while Lascelles muttered something.

"Don't worry," Carlo said. "I'll bring you a fucking bottle."

He rowed off towards the beach and Lascelles disappeared below. Kirsty moved back to Ramesh's side.

"There's going to be trouble," she said anxiously. "If he makes a pass at Lani, Cady's going to erupt."

"Definitely. Do you want to go ashore?"

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No Ramesh. But I'm not going to bed now. I'll make some more coffee."

It had been a good party, simple and satisfying. Mountains of food and rivers of drink. There were a dozen men working the plantation but apart from Lani the only other female was Daubin's wife, a plump, jolly woman. So after the meal she and Lani had to dance with all the men including the three

ornithologists. They were all English, serious and middle-aged, but after the consumption of several glasses of *calou* they visibly relaxed and joined in the fun.

Cady had drunk little but as he watched Lani dancing with the captain of *La Belle Vue* he felt mildly intoxicated and realised that it was not only alcohol that drugged the senses. He felt like a young boy on a date. Although with the preponderance of men he had danced only once with Lani she had, by her actions, proclaimed that she was with him. After every dance she came back to his side, natural and unselfconscious. There had been no chance for intimate conversation but he felt very close to her.

The music was provided by three of the workers. One played a banjo, another a violin and the third a traditional zeze, a centuries old instrument consisting of a stretched string attached to a calabash to provide resonance.

They were an unlikely trio but what they lacked in musical skill was more than compensated by enthusiasm. The venue was the copra drying shed, open on all sides By midnight the new father was suitably drunk and Cady guessed that in a short while the party would come to a close.

During the evening he had talked to the three ornithologists. They had heard of Kirsty's story and were sympathetic. They were doing field work for the Royal Society preparatory to the setting up of a permanent scientific base on one of the islands. They were deeply disillusioned by the few days they had spent on *Jaloud*. The food was terrible, the boat dirty, and Lascelles and Carlo often drunk and abusive.

On finding *La Belle Vue* at Poivre they had tried to charter her instead but she had to return to Mahé in the morning with a cargo of copra. However, the captain was taking a letter to the owner and, if terms were agreed, he would return and meet up with them either at Farquhar or Aldabra. In the meantime they had decided to stay on shore as much as possible.

Lani had just finished dancing and plumped down beside Cady, fanning her face, when Carlo appeared. Everyone was sitting in a semi-circle facing the trio with the makeshift dance floor in the middle. Henri Daubin was beside a table laden with bottles and glasses. He stood up, filled a glass and gave it to Carlo.

"Calou – it's all that's left."

"Thanks." Carlo took the glass and drained half of it. The trio was still playing. Daubin's wife was dancing with a crew member from *La Belle Vue*, but the atmosphere had lost its edge.

Carlo looked around him, oblivious to the effect his presence had caused. He saw Lani and Cady sitting with the ornithologists and ambled over. Ignoring Cady he nodded at the Englishman and said to Lani, "Dance?"

Curtly Lani shook her head and looked away. He stood there, rocking on his heels, his eyes travelling insolently down her body.

"What are you, Chiu Chow? Fukienese? Cantonese?"

He saw her eyes lift and he grinned and said something that none of the others could understand. She looked surprised, and then shook her head.

"I don't want to dance."

The music had stopped. Carlo contemplated her for a while; a half sneer appeared on his face and he said something else.

In a second she was off her chair and the shed resounded to the sharp slap as she slashed a hand across his face.

He backed off two paces, grinning now. Cady was on his feet beside her, an arm in front of her.

"What did he say?"

Her eyes full of hate, she spat out, "He called me a whore!"

"OK." Cady gently pushed her back. To Carlo he said, "You're gonna suffer for that."

Carlo's grin widened. "Like I said kid, there ain't no hospital here. You mix with me – I'll do a lot worse than Danny." He pointed his chin at Lani and laughed. "I get through with you an' even Suzy Wong here won't find your prick in the mess."

Suddenly there were a dozen men around them, all eyeing Carlo menacingly. Henri Daubin said to him, "You'd better get back on your boat – and stay there."

Carlo ignored him. He looked at Cady and laughed again.

"Got you a little army, huh?"

Cady shook his head and caught Daubin's eye. A look passed between them and after a moment's hesitation Daubin

nodded and spoke in creole. The men backed away, forming a large circle.

"Jus' you an' me," Cady drawled and moved forward. Still grinning Carlo dropped into a crouch, turning his left shoulder forward.

Cady, fully erect, edged in and, as Carlo's left fist hooked to his face, ducked under it.

There came a dull thud and Carlo doubled up from the blow to his stomach. Cady's knee slammed up into his open face with a crunching, cracking sound and Carlo went over backwards, landing on the packed dirt, one hand clutching his belly, the other across the top of his face. His grin was gone.

"Get up!"

Cady's voice was like a polar wind.

Carlo rolled over on to his side, then pushed himself on to his knees. Blood dripping from his broken nose mingling with the brown dirt. He got one foot up and then the other, paused and then with a bellow rushed in a crouch, his bullet head aimed at Cady's crotch.

Like a matador Cady swayed to his left, twisted and brought the side of his hand slamming down on to the back of Carlo's neck.

"Get up!"

Carlo lay half under one of the tables. His mouth in the dirt, his shoulders heaving. Again he rolled on to his side and looked up. There was fear in his eyes now – and puzzlement. He scrabbled out from under the table and pushed his way up with its aid, and stood against it sucking in gulps of air. Blood dribbled down the black stubble of his chin.

He lurched against the table, rattling glasses. His legs seemed to buckle but then in an instant he had a bottle in his hand, and Lani screamed as it smashed against the side of the table and its jagged edges were stabbing at Cady's face.

Carlo was as fast as a striking snake but Cady was the mongoose. Riding back, weaving his face away from the lunge, then moving forward as Carlo overbalanced, catching his wrist, swinging under it and again bringing up a knee.

Carlo's arm cracked and he screamed as the bottle left his fingers.

"Get up!"

Carlo lay moaning, clutching his arm.

"Get up," Cady intoned.

"My arm's broke!"

"Tough shit! Get up or I swear I'll kick your balls right out through your ass!"

Behind him Cady heard one of the Englishmen mutter, "God, this is horrible."

Another voice, also English, said, "He asked for it."

Carlo was rolling his eyes in supplication at Daubin and the other men. They stared back stonily.

"Get up!" Cady took a pace forward and Carlo rolled away, moaning in pain. He got to his knees and then his feet, his face working in fear. He tried to run but Cady, astonishingly fast for his size, easily caught him. He slammed him against one of the roof supports and with precision hooked a final left to his jaw. Then he stood back and watched as Carlo sank to his knees and slumped over, his face resting in the dirt.

Cady drew a deep, deep breath and then exhaled, letting the hate and tension flow out of him.

They were looking at him: Daubin and the islanders with respect. The Englishmen with shocked awe. Lani was not looking at him. Her eyes were on Carlo. She walked across and stood over him and said something that sounded like, "Lap Sap!"

The moon was well up, and on *Manasa* Kirsty and Ramesh could dimly see the group come down to the beach. They were carrying something heavy. They saw it loaded into a dinghy and several men get in and row out towards *Jaloud*. Another dinghy headed towards *Manasa*.

It arrived first and Cady and Lani climbed aboard.

"What happened?" Ramesh asked.

"Wait," Cady replied.

They stood and watched as the other dinghy pulled alongside *Jaloud*. Someone called out "Lascelles" and after a couple of minutes he appeared on deck. He looked down into the dinghy and they heard his mutter, "Carlo! What the fuck?"

With some difficulty the slack and moaning Carlo was

hoisted aboard and the men in the dinghy returned to the beach calling out a cheerful "good night" to *Manasa*.

Kirsty made more coffee and Cady went below to wash the blood off his hands while Lani explained what had happened.

Kirsty and Ramesh felt immense satisfaction. They saw it as a balancing out. Cady had vindicated himself. Kirsty reminded them of Jack Nelson's story about Carlo being the only man Lascelles had never beaten in a fight

"Easy!" Lani said "Even with a broken bottle. That 'lap sap' was useless – Cady beat him easily!"

"What's 'lap sap'?" Ramesh asked and Lani grinned.

"Rubbish – garbage – that 'lap sap' called me a whore and Cady punished him."

Her eyes were shining with excitement and she recounted again how Carlo had stabbed at Cady with the broken bottle and Cady had casually broken his arm.

But Cady, when he came back on deck, was in a sober mood. He decided that a mistake had been made. By now Lascelles would have realised that in the earlier fight his first sneaky punch had decided it in his favour. Being a coward he would not try again. In effect he was backed into a corner and was now more likely than ever to resort to guns. The fight had been counter-productive.

Kirsty and Ramesh were not so sure. If Lascelles was going to crack, the sight of his beaten and broken accomplice might hasten the process. Kirsty was anxious though that Lascelles might now head back to Mahé. What about Carlo's broken arm? Or would he send him back on the schooner?

Cady reassured her. The break was clean. Daubin, with much experience, had set it and put on a plaster cast. Carlo would stay on the *Jaloud*. The next morning they would take the Englishmen to Desnouf.

The 'haunting' would continue.

21

It continued an hour after dawn. The 'bird men', as Lani called them, came down to the beach with their bags and Daubin rowed them out to the *Jaloud*. As they drew alongside Lascelles came on deck. He looked across at *Manasa* where the four of them were having breakfast. He gazed first at Cady, then Kirsty.

"He's changed. There's a difference," Ramesh murmured. "He's not as tall. His chin is not jutting so much as yesterday."

The bird men were all aboard and Lascelles turned away. He moved to the wheel and a moment later a cloud of blue smoke coughed out from *Jaloud*'s exhaust One of the bird men went forward to the anchor chain

"Come on, Cady," Ramesh said, through a mouthful of toast.

Then minutes later *Jaloud* headed into the fairway at six knots with *Manasa* following thirty yards behind. Ramesh was puzzled for Lascelles was not steering safely down the middle of the channel but keeping over to the extreme right. But the man had been through here a lot of times and must know the best route. Then Ramesh looked down at Dave's chart and saw the two tiny inked crosses close together and the notation: 'Coral heads Unmarked. 4'

So that was it. Lascelles knew exactly where they were and he was going to take *Jaloud* between them – a gap of about only eight feet. He would assume that Ramesh would be unaware of their existence and with luck would hit one and tear the bottom out of *Manasa*.

Ramesh smiled grimly. He followed exactly until they were about fifty yards from the coral heads, then swung the wheel, heading back into the centre of the fairway.

Lascelles did not see the manoeuvre. He was rigid with concentration. Suddenly he twisted the wheel one way and

then the other. *Jaloud* snaked and one of the bird men, standing by the dog house, cried out and pointed into the water directly over the side.

But *Jaloud* was through and Lascelles was twisting to see if *Manasa* had followed. He saw them off his port quarter, safely in the centre of the fairway, and from *Manasa*'s deck they could see the scowl darken his face.

Ramesh raised two fingers in the traditional gesture of contempt.

An hour later they were in an exuberant mood. The stiff wind was off the starboard quarter and *Jaloud* was a hundred yards off the port beam. For the past half hour both yachts had been under sail only and Ramesh had been delighted to discover that *Manasa* easily kept pace with the bigger *Jaloud*. Lascelles had changed course several times, but whether on a reach or a run or sailing close to the wind *Manasa* was able to stay in close touch. Finally Lascelles had turned back south-south-east on course for Desnouf and switched on his engine, and Ramesh followed suit.

"Now he'll pull away," Cady had muttered. But the gap between the yachts remained the same.

"How about that!" Cady had exclaimed. "For her size that black bastard is a fat old cow!" He patted the coach roof affectionately and grinned at Ramesh. "But old *Manasa* slides along like a greased ski! That ain't gonna do much for Lascelles' mood!"

He was right. Ramesh kept *Manasa* close abeam and every time Lascelles looked across he saw Kirsty watching him. Eventually he switched off the engine and went below, leaving one of the bird men at the wheel, who waved cheerily. Ramesh also cut his engine and the two boats slowed and sailed in silence.

Cady and Lani paid feathered lines out astern to catch lunch and made a bet as to who would get a fish first. In the event they hit a shoal of dorado and both cried out at the same time. Cady boated his first but Lani insisted that she had the first strike. Anyway, hers was marginally longer so the bet had to be null and void.

They reached Desnouf in the mid afternoon and, as was

the case approaching Bird Island, they could see the swarming mass of sooty terns from many miles out.

They followed *Jaloud* into the anchorage and, as before, dropped anchor forty yards off his beam. Lascelles went about the business of securing his boat without once glancing at *Manasa*. Twice Kirsty called out to him: "Lascelles Where's my son?"

Both times he ignored her. She sat on the stern calmly watching him.

The bird men loaded up the dinghy with tents and equipment, then rowed towards *Manasa*.

"We're spending the night ashore," one of them said, with a knowing look. "We plan to head on to Farquhar tomorrow."

Ramesh turned to mutter something to Lani, who nodded. He called out to the dinghy. "Come on board for dinner – Chinese food – around seven."

"OK!" they chorused with enthusiasm and rowed away to the beach.

'Red', 'Brown' and 'White', Lani had now nicknamed the bird men from the colour of their hair. With a twinkle she added that all westerners looked alike to her and thank God that hair colouring was at least one distinguishing feature.

"He's like a bear in a pit," 'Red' said and deftly popped another piece of spiced crab into his mouth.

'White', whose hair was merely flecked with grey, nodded in agreement. "He's not naturally of a placid disposition but these last two days he's been like a kettle with two spouts and steam coming out of both."

He reached forward and tried to pick up a flaky piece of red snapper but it disintegrated between his chopsticks.

Lani picked up the long serving chopsticks and delicately lifted a piece into his bowl. She then did the same from the half a dozen other dishes containing crab, grouper, dorado and vegetables.

"Thank you Lani," he said and looked at the spread before him. "Who would have thought we'd be eating a meal like this hundreds of miles from civilisation."

Now 'Brown' joined the conversation. "Delicious," he

muttered, laid down his chopsticks with which he had been very adept, wiped his mouth with a napkin, burped gently and said to Ramesh,

"I think you should be careful. I'm no psychologist but in his present state Lascelles could be dangerous. I think he's definitely unsound." He paused. "He has diving equipment on board – and he's a powerful swimmer."

Ramesh and Cady nodded in unison. That evening they had held a council of war and decided that during the night Lascelles might try to sabotage *Manasa*.

They had carried out an elaborate charade. From below Ramesh had brought up a fearsome looking three-pronged harpoon.

Lascelles and Carlo had sat on *Jaloud*'s deck; the latter's right arm encased in white, his face a bruised and swollen lump.

They had watched as Ramesh rested the harpoon against the rail and leaned over the side and looked into the clear water. Cady was further up near the bow doing the same. He said loudly,

"You're right, Ramesh. We hang a couple of lights over each side an' we'll be able to see clear to the bottom. Piece of piss to stick anythin' within ten feet." He grinned and looked up at Lascelles. "Might catch us a juicy fat fish."

Lascelles had scowled and turned his head away, muttering something to Carlo.

"Cady and I are standing a night watch," Ramesh said "Anyway I am not liking this anchorage. We are very exposed if the wind shifts or even strengthens."

"Very sensible," 'Brown' said. He turned to Kirsty. "I find your story fascinating – I can understand the depth of your worry and if you'd rather not talk about it I completely understand " He smiled at her sympathetically. He was a short, plump man with thick spectacles and an earnest expression. "The fact is, I am very interested in extra sensory perception. I have studied it in depth and have a theory that birds – and mammals of the same species – may communicate with each other this way.

"Oh Oh." 'White' said with a wink. "Here we go back on the old hobby horse."

But Kirsty was interested. She leaned forward and said, "I have read something of it, but know little Have you really studied it?"

'Brown' had, and for the next twenty minutes gave her a comprehensive background He talked of the scientifically controlled experiments that had been carried out in Europe and America. How people had concentrated on a set of numbers or colours or random articles and other people, sometimes in the next room and other times at great distances, had written down those numbers or colours or articles and in certain cases had them correct to a factor of seventy per cent. Too high to be coincidence Besides, there was logic to it. Human beings had invented and built radio and television, which could transmit messages and images around the world and millions of miles into space Yet the human brain was infinitely more sophisticated than any machine and certainly emitted charged beams.

"Have you experience of it?" he asked her. "Do you feel in communication with your son?"

"Yes," she murmured. "Sometimes stronger than others. Once, when I was in Dar es Salaam, I woke early. I suppose I was still half asleep I was thinking of Garret and then I had a strange feeling – as though he was very near - even in the same room . . and then " she glanced around at the others, looking for scepticism.

"Go on," 'Brown' urged.

"Well . . . I sort of smelt something As though I was in a hospital . . . you know hospital smells . . . like ether and stuff. I was frightened. Always frightened of hospitals and Garret . . ." her voice petered down. "He's got a very rare blood group . I wondered if I'd been dreaming . . ."

'Brown' sat back in his chair nodding his head sagely.

"Of course," he mused, "it could have been past association. On the other hand . . . fascinating."

They had finished eating and every morsel of food had disappeared. Lani stood up and started clearing the dishes. Kirsty rose to help but Lani waved her away.

"I'll do it tonight – and make the coffee."

The conversation turned naturally enough to birds and other fauna of the islands. 'Red' explained that the islands

visited so far were only of interest in a specialised way. Like the tern colonies of Bird Island and Desnouf. What they were really waiting for was Aldabra. They would spend several weeks there. His eyes gleamed as he talked of it. How it was like the Galapagos, one of the most remarkable islands in the world, and because of its inaccessibility and environment had been largely left in peace by man. Consequently its fauna and flora have flourished untouched. He told them of the vast lagoon which dries out at every low tide and fills again at the change – a sort of giant flushing system. Of the tens of thousands of tortoises and turtles which coexist with massive coconut eating crabs, and the small flightless rail, related to the ostrich and emu and the extinct dodo. Only on Aldabra had they escaped the ravages of man. There had been rumours that the British Defence Ministry were considering turning Aldabra into a massive east of Suez air base Hence, the bird men had been sent out to investigate the potential ecological damage. They would spend at least a month on the island and they already knew that their report would recommend that nothing – not even a solitary hotel – be introduced. He spoke with enthusiasm and eloquence and for half an hour or so even Kirsty was caught by its magic and her mind diverted.

It was only later when, after profuse thanks, they had rowed ashore, and Cady and Ramesh had prepared the lights and lowered them close to the water and the black hull of *Jaloud* was illuminated, that her mood changed once again

She had little sleep that night. As she lay on her side of the V bunk in the fo'c'sle with her feet almost touching Lani's, she felt a mixture of emotions: Garret, Ramesh, the wonders of Aldabra, all swirled around in her head.

Every two hours the boat vibrated gently as Ramesh or Cady switched on the engine and ran it for fifteen minutes to charge the batteries and keep the hanging lights bright.

22

During the three hundred mile journey south to Farquhar Kirsty fell in love with the sea and sailing. She had slowly drawn into herself, unconsciously locking the other three from her mind. They seemed to understand her mood and were not offended.

Lani and Cady were drawing closer to each other, and in the long night watches Lani was usually absent from the fo'c'sle when Cady was on deck.

Ramesh too seemed wrapped in his own thoughts and during the day had taken to reading a lot. Not just his well-thumbed 'bible' but other books which he kept in the locker under his bunk. They covered history, the sea, travel and the works of modern philosophers. The atmosphere was relaxed and during the three day voyage Kirsty, in a way communing with the sea, came to understand herself.

The *Jaloud* was always in sight, even during the nights, for the moon was full and the skies cloudless.

During the first night she sat alone on the foredeck and watched the dark sails a few hundred yards off the port bow. Kirsty knew that this tandem journey would have a result. She felt that she was now sailing towards Garret, every swoop of *Manasa* over the waves bringing her closer. The sea was her friend, bearing her inexorably towards her son. For the first time since leaving New York her impatience was gone, soothed out of her by the sea, and the steady onward surge of *Manasa*. She decided that later, when it was all over, she wanted to stay with the sea. It had become part of her life, like the blood that pumped through her veins.

On the third morning she woke before dawn. Lani was sleeping soundly.

Kirsty went through into the saloon and peered up through the companionway.

"Coffee Ramesh?"

"Humm. You have been reading my thoughts Kirsty."

She brought the coffee up and wedged his mug in front of the wheel and leaned against one of the stays The wind was light and *Manasa* crept slowly, the only sound being the swish of the small bow wave. The eastern horizon showed a hint of light.

"Ramesh . . . Sorry, I've been a bit quiet these few days."

He turned and in the gloom she saw the flash of his teeth as he smiled. "It is all right Kirsty. I think you are not unhappy."

"No. If anything the opposite. I feel at peace. I think it's the sea."

He was silent for a while, then said, "I know what you mean. I feel it often. It is so big So vast. It makes me feel that I am travelling in space. Just a speck – and of course a speck is not having any problems."

She moved next to him and put an arm on his shoulder and leaned forward and kissed him on the ear. He turned his head and his hand came up into her hair and he was kissing her lips and murmuring her name.

"Be patient Ramesh," she whispered into his ear.

"I will," he whispered back. "Specks in space are always patient."

They turned with arms around each other and watched the eastern sky blush into sunrise.

Of all the islands they had visited Farquhar captured Lani the most. She stood on the foredeck with Cady as *Manasa* glided into the lagoon through the fairway. It ran close in to the curve of sand called the 'twenty-five franc beach'. The island itself was a crescent and of all the outer islands its lagoon offered the only safe anchorage in any weather conditions.

On an instinct Ramesh anchored a hundred yards from *Jaloud*. Everyone on *Manasa* had the feeling that the haunting would soon be over. The boil only remained to be lanced and it would not be done here. Somehow it was the poultice. Aldabra would be the scalpel.

Farquhar had a comparatively large settlement. The first night they had dinner ashore with the manager, a Mr

Jacques Renée, together with the bird men, whose only interest was to visit the nearby islet of Goulettes and its tern colony. However, they wanted to stay at least three days on Farquhar. First to enjoy a few creature comforts in the island's guest house, and secondly in the hope that *La Belle Vue* would arrive from Mahé and they could dump Lascelles and *Jaloud*.

On the second morning *Jaloud* left for Goulettes. It was to be a day trip only and Cady and Lani decided to stay on Farquhar and explore while Ramesh and Kirsty maintained the haunting.

They spent the day rambling through the three-mile-long island. They came across the occasional plantation workers who, on seeing them, would invariably pick up the nearest coconut, decapitate it with a machete and offer them the resulting cup of thirst-quenching milk.

By early evening they were on the top end of the twenty-five franc beach. They watched *Jaloud* come in through the channel, closely followed by *Manasa*. Both yachts tacked around the point and disappeared into the curve of the lagoon.

Cady and Lani sat on the powdery white beach and neither had the inclination to leave.

As the sun dipped and the shadows of the palms stretched out across the sand Lani said,

"I think now, at this time and in this place you should kiss me."

Cady slowly lay back until he was horizontal on the beach. He looked up at her and, in a bantering tone, said: "I would. But I'm scared as hell of the effect."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm so damned ugly you might have a heart attack."

"Ugly?"

"Sure. I heard you talkin' to Ramesh that night. What am I? A barbarian . . . ? No, an ape! – a hairy ape!"

She smiled at the recollection. "Then you heard me say that I would get used to it."

"Sure – like a goddam pork pie!"

Her smile widened. "Cady, it is true you are ugly – beyond imagining – but I still want you to kiss me."

She leaned down and her face was inches from his mouth - in his mind a membrane away. He felt her breath on his face.

Very slowly he raised his head from the sand and their lips touched. The mechanic that he was, his mind likened it to an electric circuit being joined.

She did not think of it. Just enjoyed the contact. Her mouth parted and her tongue slid across his lips and then, like an opening, curious flower, probed.

A lifetime passed, then she raised her head and looked down at him. He was bare chested and she ran a hand through the blond mat and whispered. "My barbarian. My ugly ape."

He pulled her back down to him and they kissed again and he twisted in the sand until he was looking down at her.

"Why? If I'm ugly, why do you kiss me?"

She rolled her head, moulding it into the sand, and asked, "Are all barbarians as stupid as you?"

He narrowed his eyes in mock anger and she smiled and said, "Cady, I love you. I must love you. How else could I kiss such an ugly man unless I loved him!"

The deserted beach echoed to his grateful laughter, then he sobered and asked seriously, "Why do you love me?"

She thought; her lovely brow wrinkled in concentration, then she answered him.

"It's the balance. The 'yin' and the 'yang'." She noted his puzzled face and explained: "You are very strong, very tough, truly a barbarian. That may attract some women. But not me. It must be balanced. The 'yin' is woman, the 'yang' is man. There must be a balance. You have it. You are steel and you are cotton wool – not separate but together. One is nothing without the other. The whole makes you. The whole is what I love."

He pondered that then asked, "If you are so wise, tell me why I love you."

She smiled and her brow wrinkled again.

"Because the 'yang' in you wants to protect me. Because you see me as beautiful. Because you need to love – and I am here. Because the 'yin' in you responds to my love." She paused and said very seriously, "Because in our lives we are lucky we met and find ourselves together. Now must we keep talking? Is it not enough what we feel?"

"Yes But Lani, I also know you are a virgin – yes I know. You talk to Ramesh. I talk to Kirsty." He smiled. "Help the 'yin' in me. I have never been with a virgin."

She smiled and stretched languorously and slid both her arms around his neck and kissed him again and said,

"Barbarian, I will close my eyes to exclude the ugliness of you. But do it now, and when I open my eyes you will be beautiful."

And so it was. She kept her eyes shut tight. He loosened her shorts and she arched her back as he slid them off and the wisp of white beneath. She rolled one side to the other as he eased off her halter top. Her breath quickened perceptibly as he ran a hand wondrously down her body, contouring the peaks of her breasts, the slope of her belly and the slim silky valley between her thighs – already moist

A brief hiatus while he wriggled out of his own shorts. A poignant pause while he hovered over her, then slowly, with excruciating pleasure he was easing inside her. A momentary twist of pain on her lips, a hesitation from him, then with a gasp she arched up to him. His hand slid under her bottom and pulled her close and tight and he moved, probing and moaning deep in his throat.

He was sensitive to reaction and his heart quickened as he felt her response. The momentary pain as she involuntarily dug nails into his back. The whites of her eyes as they rolled oblivious. And finally the roller-coaster ride of her belly as her nerve ends reached out and grasped the first sweet orgasm of her young life.

They shuddered together, clinging and gasping, sweat lubricating the shift of skin on skin

She subsided slowly, a longer pause each time between shudders and she pulled his head tight into her neck and hooked her slim brown legs around his thighs as though to hold him forever She opened her eyes and with her lips vibrating against his ear she sighed, "Cady. You are beautiful."

That night they all barbecued ashore with Renée and his workers and the bird men. They had no worries about *Manasa.* She rode at a mooring thirty yards from where they sat. The

twin lights hung from her sides and they could see clearly beneath the keel. Every couple of hours Cady or Ramesh would go out and charge the batteries.

The workers made a big fuss of Cady. They had learned of his beating of Carlo from the bird men. Neither Carlo nor his skipper were popular, and the workers slapped Cady on the shoulder and made sure his glass of *calou* was never empty.

A pig had been killed for the occasion. They had scooped a big hole out of the sand and lined it with stones and built a fire. The pig lay across it on a makeshift grill of expanded metal. They sat in a circle round the fire and while they waited for it to cook one of the workers, an old, grizzled fellow, played a zeze and sang. The words were obviously humorous for the workers grinned throughout and laughed when it was over.

Kirsty was sitting next to Renée, with Ramesh on the other side.

'What's it about?" she asked Renée.

"It's a naughty song. Most of them are." He smiled and slid her a look. "Shall I translate it for you? You won't be shocked?"

"I doubt it."

"Well it's about a girl called Anne-Marie who is a little loose, you understand. She is visiting an island. One day the manager injures himself trying to turn a turtle over on the beach. She runs to help him."

Renée called out something in creole and the old man started the song again. Ramesh leaned over and listened as Renée translated.

"Tell me where it hurts."
"Touch me, Anne-Marie, and I'll tell you."
She placed her hand on me and I broke out into
a cold sweat.
"But tell me where it hurts."
"Touch me, Anne-Marie, and I'll tell you when
you've found it."
She begins to look for it.
"Is it here?"
"No!"

"There?"
"No . . . Anne-Marie, you'll have to massage me.
Rub me quickly, I can't stand the pain!
Lower down lower!
Don't be afraid.
Ah!! That's it!! Again, again!!"

Everyone burst out laughing and Renée, with a sly grin, asked Kirsty, "Did it shock you?"

"Oh no." She smiled. "But perhaps it shocked Ramesh."

Ramesh was looking studiously around the expanse of beach. "No," he said "I was looking for a large turtle!"

They ate the pork with their fingers from strips of palm leaf, together with small pumpkins in sweet sauce. It was delicious and messy and afterwards everyone went into the lagoon to wash off with a swim. Later they gathered again around the embers of the fire and the old man sang again.

Lani and Cady were sitting close together a little back from the others. She was leaning against him, an arm draped casually over his thigh.

Kirsty watched them from the other side of the fire, then said,

"Ramesh, I'm not propositioning you or anything, but I think it's time I swapped bunks with Cady "

His head swivelled in surprise. "Oh! What are you meaning?"

She pointed with her chin. "Look at them. What do you see?"

He studied the couple for several minutes and a slow smile spread across his face. "I am seeing that they are in love "

"More than that Ramesh – they are lovers."

"But she is a virgin!"

"Was, Ramesh. I think now she is a woman."

She turned her head to look at him. He was still gazing across the fire. The smile was still on his lips. Slowly he nodded.

"Kirsty, I think you are right."

"It won't be difficult for you?" she asked. "I mean my being in the other bunk."

He pursed his lips and said seriously, "Well, let me say that I will be exercising great restraint and thinking hard of other things."

"What things?"

"Well maybe of Aldabra, and all the wonderful creatures there . . . yes, especially those giant tortoises . . . and how easy it is to become injured turning them over!"

The bird men had decided that if *La Belle Vue* had not arrived by noon the following day they would leave a message and press on to Aldabra with *Jaloud*.

At eleven in the morning Kirsty and Cady went ashore. Renée had promised Kirsty the run of the settlement's vegetable garden, and Cady wanted to pick up an extra can of lubricating oil from the settlement's stores. He quickly found it and paid for it and then went round to the guest house to chat with the bird men. But they were not there. They had gone off to the northern point of the island to see if they could spot *La Belle Vue*. Cady found a few magazines lying on the patio table and sat down and started browsing through an old *Time*.

Kirsty found him there twenty minutes later. She was carrying two huge baskets woven from palm leaves.

"So what's new in the world, Cady?"

He looked up startled, then tossed the magazine back on the table.

"Who in hell knows – that's months old. Here, let me take those."

He put the can of oil into one of the baskets on top of a pile of pumpkins and they turned to the beach.

23

Cady unpacked the guns, cleaned them carefully, unloaded and reloaded the clips and then placed them all in the long, shallow open-topped box that he had built just inside the companionway. It was invisible from the deck, but easily reached, even from the wheel.

The *Manasa* was anchored alone a hundred yards off Île Picard, at the north-western edge of the Aldabra lagoon. The regular camp site was nearby. Having placed the guns and practised reaching for them a few times, he picked up the binoculars and panned along the horizon, past the northern edge of the island.

The others were all ashore. It had been decided not to shadow the *Jaloud* on the four-day voyage, but to press on ahead and maybe have a little time to look around before the final confrontation.

But they had arrived the morning before and there was still no sign of *Jaloud.* Kirsty, in particular, was getting worried. To take her mind off it Ramesh had taken her and Lani ashore, promising her that if they still had not arrived by dawn they would sail round the lagoon in the unlikely event that *Jaloud* was anchored elsewhere

Cady was about to lower the binoculars when *Jaloud* sailed into view. She was about five miles away and had previously been hidden by the outer curve of the island. He watched her sailing slowly on a port tack that would take her three or four miles from the nearest point of the island. There was little wind and he was puzzled, until he suddenly realised that they must have had engine trouble. He considered sounding the siren to alert the others but then discarded the idea. With the low, easterly wind it would be two or three hours before *Jaloud* tacked in.

On shore, Lani was feeding a piece of bread to a rail. It was

tiny, with a little hunched back, spindly legs and a long, sharp beak; and it was completely unafraid.

They had been enchanted by Aldabra. The moment they had dropped anchor noddy terns had flown out and perched on the booms and the cross trees of the masts. They were totally unaffected by the presence of humans. Kirsty and Lani had been delighted but Ramesh had looked at the decks and the first droppings and said wryly to Cady:

"If we stay here long enough I'll be able to go into business selling guano!"

On shore they marvelled at the thousands of tortoises dozing in the shade, their heads stretched out to increase ventilation. They saw little rails darting about pecking at their skin and remembered the bird men explaining how they picked the lice from folds of the tortoises' flesh. Huge crabs with long red claws were everywhere. They looked fearsome but their flesh was reputed to be one of the world's great delicacies for they ate the flesh and drank the milk of fallen coconuts. There were birds everywhere. Irises, multicoloured pigeons, terns, boobies and the elegant egrets. The waters of the lagoon stretched to the horizon. The tide was coming in when they first saw it and the birds wheeled and dived in their thousands over the water feasting on the twice daily bounty so conveniently provided.

Kirsty above all was enraptured. Were it not for a worry about the absent *Jaloud* she would have wandered for hours.

"I would like to stay here for months," she told Ramesh on their first night while she lay in her bunk four feet away from him. "I would like to study them – learn how they co-exist. It's the most wonderful place I've ever seen. How Garret would love it! He's always loved animals and nature."

The *Jaloud* was two miles out and coming straight in when they returned to the beach. On seeing it Kirsty felt a mixture of relief and apprehension. The apprehension was for the others. She knew that things were coming to a head and she feared for their safety.

Back on board they watched as *Jaloud* crept in towards the beach. Carlo was at the helm, gripping it with his good arm. Lascelles was at the forepeak, peering forward into the

water, calling out instructions. Not once did he even glance at *Manasa*. The three bird men stood on the deck waiting to take in sail.

Lascelles called out a final instruction and Carlo swung the wheel and the yacht turned into the wind and lost way. The sails came down and the anchor splashed into the water, about eighty yards from *Manasa*.

For the next hour the bird men made several trips to the shore unloading equipment until a small mountain of it was piled on the beach. Lascelles did not help them. Once satisfied that *Jaloud* was riding safely at anchor he had gone below, again without a glance at *Manasa*.

With all the equipment ashore, one of the bird men rowed up to *Manasa*. It was 'Brown', and he was sweating from his recent exertions.

Lani fetched him a beer and after a grateful gulp he said, "Engine trouble. Last night. Something to do with the fuel pump."

"Can it be fixed?" Kirsty asked.

"He says so – by tomorrow. He's been working on it all day."

Cady nodded. "Probably a gasket. If he's not got a spare he can make one out of somethin' – not a big problem."

"Look," 'Brown' said, still panting slightly. "I came to warn you. That man's bloody mad – I tell you mad. When the engine broke down last night he went crazy. Blamed Carlo for it and slapped him around. In his condition he could hardly defend himself. When we tried to intervene he threatened to throw us overboard!" He paused for breath and took another gulp of beer. "And another thing – he's got a bloody gun. I saw him in his cabin through the hatch, cleaning it."

"We know," Ramesh said quietly.

"You know?! And you're still going through with this?"

He looked at them all in amazement. "You must be crazy too."

"What kind of gun was it?" Cady asked lightly.

"I don't know. I don't know anything about guns."

"Describe it."

'Brown' did so and Cady nodded and said, "A Sten."

"We've got . . " Lani started to say but Cady quickly cut her off.

"You just saw one?"

'Brown' nodded. "He was sitting on his bed – cleaning it." He looked at their faces again and said, "We seriously thought about paying him off and taking our chances that *La Belle Vue* will turn up – but this island has no water and we need what's in his tanks. If he did leave, you'd follow him?"

They all nodded and he looked bemused for a moment, then said, "Anyway, we're going to be all over the island in our work but we've decided that in the meantime one of us will always stay in the camp. There'll be a witness if he tries anything."

Ramesh said thoughtfully, "That could be dangerous for the witness – and all of you."

'Brown' shook his head. "We might all be absent-minded scientists, but we're not without common sense. We had doubts when we first chartered him, so we only paid a ten per cent deposit. He gets the balance when the job's over or he presents a letter to the bank signed by all of us . . it's a lot of money."

They all thought about it and Cady finally said, "Yeah. An' he's a guy who always needs money. He won't jeopardise that."

'Brown' put down his glass "I'd better get back and help the others make camp. For God's sake be bloody careful "

He was about to turn to the gangway when he spotted something and his troubled face cleared. He pointed: "Look!"

They turned to see *La Belle Vue* sailing round the point.

"Thank God," 'Brown' said fervently. "Now we'll give that bugger his letter and get rid of him." Abruptly he checked his delight and asked solemnly, "You're really going to follow him?"

He saw them all nod again in unison and he said, "I wish you all the luck."

The *Jaloud*'s engine coughed into life an hour after dawn and *Manasa*'s followed a minute later. Half an hour passed while both engines idled, during which time Cady commented that Lascelles was making sure the new gasket was a good seal.

Then Lascelles came on deck and started taking in the anchor. Immediately Ramesh nodded to Cady, who did the same.

Jaloud secured first and immediately turned and moved towards *Manasa*. For a moment Ramesh thought he was going to try to ram them, but then the angle of her bow changed and she passed ten yards astern. Lascelles was still on the foredeck. Looking directly at Kirsty he called out: "OK, bitch! Now follow me at your fuckin' peril!"

As *Manasa* followed *Jaloud* on a north-easterly course a council of war was held on her afterdeck. Cady opened it.

"Ramesh I ain't tryin' to abrogate your position but I got a bit more experience than you in violence an' I've worked out a plan."

"Tell me Cady. Where does an oil driller learn words like abrogate?"

"Outta books," Cady grinned, and then said seriously, "the info from that bird man was useful. I was worried that Lascelles might have a rifle on board. If so he could lie off at a distance an' punch holes in us all day long. He might still have one but I doubt it. A rifle's long and hard to conceal an' he's known as a smuggler an' I bet Customs around here check him over good. So let's assume he's only got the Sten and maybe a hand-gun or two." He paused and his brow wrinkled in concentration. "In his place, I'd get in close an' pump a magazine full along *Manasa*'s waterline – try to cripple us . . . or maybe he'll aim for the helmsman an' then go for the waterline. Either way he don't plan to leave anyone alive – or any evidence."

He glanced behind him at the receding island. "He won't even wait for darkness. He'll want to see what he's doin'. He'll make his move soon as we're over the horizon in about three hours. Wind's behind us so no one back there'll hear a thing. He hasn't raised sail an' with this wind he normally would."

To Ramesh he said, "At the first sign of trouble you take the helm and the Walther. Our big plus is surprise. He won't expect us to be armed. Soon as he turns you keep our bow pointed right at him." He gestured at the dog house. "We put spare jerry cans of water along there. They'll absorb

the impact of bullets aimed at the helm. Kirsty, you and Lani go straight below into the aft cabin. Keep close to the engine room bulkhead You'll be safe there."

"It's my son," Kirsty said firmly. "I'm not going to hide."

Cady sighed. "Kirsty we only have two guns No point in exposin' yourself."

"Yes there is. One of you might be hit – I can take the wheel or even the gun and shoot back. Don't argue Cady, I'm not going below."

He was about to argue when Lani cut in. "I'm not going either. Both of you might be hit."

They both glared at Cady defiantly and, after a pause, he shrugged and pointed.

"OK. You squat down there behind the jerry cans. Then if *Jaloud* gets abeam or astern you drop down into the saloon."

"And what or who are we aiming at?" Ramesh asked.

Cady sighed again.

"Well I've given that a whole lotta thought. My instinct is to shoot the bastards. But if we kill 'em there ain't no chance of findin' Kirsty's son – an' that defeats the purpose. So we aim to cripple *Jaloud*. We aim for the waterline. Particularly at the stern if we get a chance. Then we stand off and wait them out. There are no boats out there. They start sinkin' and they need us." He glanced at Kirsty. "An' when I get Lascelles this time, I'll beat the truth outta him."

Cady might have been reading Lascelles' mind. Half an hour after Aldabra had disappeared over the horizon and almost when the sun was at its zenith, the *Jaloud* a hundred yards ahead suddenly swung to port.

They were ready.

Cady reached into the companionway and lifted out the Sten and the Walther, which he passed to Ramesh, hissing: "Keep the bow on her – get down girls!"

Kirsty and Lani ducked down behind the piled jerry cans.

Carlo was at the helm. Lascelles had moved amidships. He held his right hand down behind his thigh. He was grinning.

"I warned you!" he shouted and brought his right arm up.

As Cady saw the gun he stepped to the rail and raised his own, saw the shock cross Lascelles' face, and opened fire.

Two seconds later he was cursing himself for not having used one magazine for practice. The Sten gun pulled to the right. His aim had been low. A row of splashes erupted two yards from *Jaloud*'s stern. Immediately Lascelles fired back, but the shock of seeing Cady with a gun also affected his aim. He was low but several bullets ricocheted off the water and slammed into *Manasa*'s hull. He ran back to the wheelhouse and Cady literally kicked Kirsty and Lani into the saloon while he groped on the coaming for another magazine, shouting at Ramesh,

"The waterline! The waterline!"

The boats were abeam now, twenty yards apart and passing rapidly. Ramesh stepped back from the wheel and raised the pistol.

He forgot everything from his one and only lesson; forgot to steady his right wrist with his left hand; forgot to squeeze the trigger and not pull it.

His first shot hit the hull below the mast. The second slammed into Carlo, twisting him from the wheel. His thigh hit a stanchion and, with a shriek, he toppled into the sea.

Lascelles abruptly showed his cowardice. He dived headlong out of sight through the companionway.

By the time Cady had fumbled in another magazine *Jaloud* was seventy yards astern and moving away at the combined speed of twelve knots. He loosed off the second magazine and beside him Ramesh, more controlled now, was also firing. They saw splashes behind *Jaloud*'s transom and heard a clang, but she motored on.

"Turn her, Ramesh," Cady shouted, but Kirsty was already at the wheel, spinning it. Lani was also on deck handing Cady a new magazine.

He took his time fitting the magazine. When *Manasa* had finally completed its turn *Jaloud* was already a quarter of a mile away heading due west at full speed. Cady could see Lascelles crouching at the helm, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

Leaving Kirsty at the wheel Cady and Ramesh ran to the bow. Ramesh raised the pistol but Cady said, "Save it. The range is too great. We'll catch up to him."

Then they heard the shout. They turned to see Carlo in

the calm water a hundred yards to starboard. His head dipped under water, an arm waved feebly.

Neither man could take the decision. They turned to look at Kirsty's face over the dog house, saw the struggle on it, watched as her eyes flicked back and forth between *Jaloud*'s fast-receding stern and the man in the water. Then *Manasa*'s bow swung to starboard and the boat slowed. Cady and Ramesh laid their guns on the deck and started unlashing the dinghy behind the main mast. They were forty yards away and drifting in when Lani screamed, "Look!"

They raised their heads and saw the black fin circling Carlo. Immediately Cady recalled Guy Savy's words: "We have lots of sharks in these waters but they don't attack people – except maybe on the far outer islands like Aldabra."

And Carlo would be bleeding.

Cady pulled away the last restraining cord and said urgently to Ramesh, "Over the side – trail it astern."

They heaved and the dinghy cleared the rail and splashed into the water just as Carlo screamed.

He was half out of the water. They could see the great, gleaming teeth clamped on to his leg beneath the knee. The shark shook him like a dog worrying a bone, then backed off and circled again.

Later, Cady found no answer to the question of why he'd done it.

"The stern!" he shouted at Ramesh, who ran down the deck with the dinghy's painter in his hand.

Cady found himself in the water. He had no recollection of diving in. He reached Carlo at the same time as the shark. Everything was in quick motion. Carlo screaming again. The rows of ivory daggers locked on to Carlo's shoulder. The shark's tiny eyes were two feet from Cady's. Its snout inches away.

With a moan combined of fear and rage Cady kicked his legs, rose out of the water and smashed his fist at the snout.

The shark slid away and circled. Cady felt the dinghy bumping his shoulder, heard Lani and Kirsty screaming at him. He had one arm around Carlo's chest. He groped back with the other, clutched the dinghy's rounded side and with panic-induced strength swung Carlo up and into it.

The counter-force pushed him under. He twisted and, in the clear water, saw the shark twenty feet away turning like an evil scythe.

As his head cleared the surface he knew it was too late. Knew that his legs would still be in the water as he pulled himself up. He had both hands on the rubber. He kicked and dimly saw something flashing over his head

Then he was lying over the moaning Carlo. He jerked his head up and saw the shark writhing away in a foam of water – the harpoon erect and swaying in front of the fin, and then vanishing as the shark dived

Above him he heard Ramesh's shout of exultation.

24

Ten minutes after they got Carlo aboard the engine stuttered and stopped and the chase, for the moment, was over.

Cady, sitting on the deck with his back to the dog house, did not even lift his head. His arms, clutched around his knees, were still shaking. The sobs still racked his body as slowly he came out of a severe state of shock.

Lani knelt beside him, clutching him in her arms, crying with relief.

At the stern Ramesh and Kirsty worked on Carlo. He was clearly going to die.

Ramesh's bullet had taken him in the side of the stomach. His left shoulder and chest were a mass of torn flesh and splintered bone. His left leg was hanging by a tendon below the knee. Blood pumping on to the deck from an artery. Ramesh was twisting a tourniquet below the groin. His 'bible' was open on the deck beside him. He did not know what to do about the shoulder or stomach. Kirsty was holding a cloth against them, trying to stem the blood

After twenty minutes Cady had recovered. Without looking at Carlo he went below and checked the engine. When he came back on deck he announced that a bullet had hit the hose connection on the fuel tank. It would take about an hour to fix.

He was icy calm. He looked west at the horizon and could just make out the speck of *Jaloud*. He turned his attention to Carlo. Ramesh's tourniquet had slowed the bleeding at the knee to a slow ooze. The cloth wadded against his shoulder, chest and stomach was soaked with blood.

Carlo was conscious. His eyes open.

"What have you given him?" Cady asked Ramesh.

"One ml of morphine."

Cady grunted in thought, then said, "Leave me with him. Get some sail up." His voice was cold. His face set. They left him and started raising the sails.

"You hear me, Carlo?"

Carlo nodded and Cady reached down and grasped his thigh over the tourniquet.

"This thing is keepin' you alive. Now you tell me where Kirsty's son is or I'll tear it off – believe me!"

A ghostly smile appeared on Carlo's lips. He spoke and his voice was barely audible.

"Sure. First you dive in an' get me away from a shark an' then you kill me." His head rolled in negation "No Cady. 'Sides you an' I both know I'm dyin' anyway. Nearest doctor's days away an' I've got minutes . . I'm finished." His mouth twisted and he muttered, "Bastard Lascelles . . . Ain't much time . . . You're crazy comin' in for me . . . Listen."

Cady lowered his head, then closer still as the sails flapped and then steadied and *Manasa* heeled. He listened for about ten minutes and then the voice faded and Carlo gurgled deep in his throat and died.

Cady looked down at him and then with his thumb and little finger closed the sightless eyes.

He stood up and turned Ramesh at the wheel and Kirsty and Lani on the foredeck, were all looking at him. They saw the shock on his face and then his teeth clamping tight and determination in his eyes.

"Kirsty," he snapped, moving forward, "take the wheel! Ramesh help me below. We have to get the engine going."

"What is it?" Ramesh asked, looking at Carlo's body.

"Garret. I know where he is."

An hour later with the engine purring smoothly and Lani at the wheel steering a course due west Cady sat facing Kirsty in the saloon. Ramesh sat beside her, an arm round her shoulders.

Cady took a deep breath and said,

"Kirsty last year there was a revolution in Zanzibar – a very bloody one."

"I know. I read about it."

"Yes well, Lascelles apparently supplied the rebels with

some arms. Their leader was a man called Okello. It's believed he originally came from Uganda. Durin' the revolution and since he gave himself the title 'Field Marshal'. The old *Time* magazine I was readin' back on Farquhar had an article on him. Apparently his only military trainin' was a couple of months in the Kenya Police before they threw him out for sedition or somethin'. Anyway, after the revolution succeeded and many thousands died – includin' a lot tortured and killed by Okello himself – Lascelles did a couple more jobs for him. They got sort of close."

Kirsty had an impatient look in her eyes. Cady drew another breath and said,

"Fact is, Okello has a very rare blood group. Carlo wasn't too clear on this. Thinks it was somethin' like O ralus negative . . .?"

"O rhesus negative," Kirsty corrected, her face going pale.

"Uh huh. That's what Garret has?"

Kirsty shook her head. "No. He's O negative K.K."

Her fingers were clenched, the knuckles white. "But he's the perfect donor for someone who has rhesus negative and who's had a lot of transfusions and developed an antibody. Such donors are one in a million. I know – he's given blood . . ."

Cady's face showed his discomfort.

"Yeah, well, this Okello's had plenty. He's got a disease called Sickle-Cell Anaemia – means he needs constant transfusions. Lascelles knew about that. When he saw the tag round Garret's neck he took him to Zanzibar an' sold him to Okello . . . ten thousand bucks."

"Oh God!" Kirsty's hands unclenched and covered her face. She mumbled, "They've been taking his blood like vampires."

"Yes. But Kirsty it also means that Okello's been keepin' him healthy. You don't kill the goose an' so on."

She uncovered her face and he saw the tears.

Ramesh said, "But he's alive Kirsty! You were right. Now we have to get him out."

Across from him Cady grimaced and said, "That ain't gonna be too easy." He held up a hand as Kirsty looked up

sharply. "Wait on, Kirsty. You gotta understand the whole picture."

He went on to explain that the revolution was still going on. So were the purges and the killings. Several months earlier Tanganyika and Zanzibar had declared a merger into a single republic called Tanzania. But so far it was a merger in name only, and President Nyerere was trying by persuasion to make Okello moderate his policies He had no power on the island and meanwhile Okello was going his own way. The whole island was an armed camp and it was rumoured that Cubans and Chinese were present training the local militia. Getting Garret out would not be simple

Relentlessly, Cady ploughed on:

"An' there's Lascelles He would have seen us pull Carlo out. Wouldn't know if he was alive or dead, but he'd fear the worst. Right now he's gotta be headin' for Zanzibar. He'll warn Okello that we're right behind him."

"God!" Kirsty burst out. "They'll kill Garret!"

Cady shook his head. "Not necessarily Depends on how much Okello needs Garret's blood. But they'll sure as hell take precautions."

Ramesh leaned forward and said urgently,

"So we've got to catch Lascelles."

Cady shook his head. "Ramesh that gives us the dilemma. By now Lascelles will have changed course. Zanzibar is 'bout six hundred miles away an' he knows that over that distance we'd catch him easy – even by tomorrow. My guess is that he'll plot a big loop. Trouble is, will he loop north or south? We'd have to toss a coin . . . then we've got no radar. It's a damn great ocean, Ramesh. Navies send whole fleets out to find a single ship an' come up with nothin'. Our chances of findin' Lascelles are one in a million."

"So what do we do?"

Cady looked at Kirsty. "We have a choice. Over the distance and with Lascelles' detour we should arrive at Zanzibar a day or mebbe two ahead of him. Then we try an' do somethin' before Okello is warned."

He shrugged. "Or else we toss a coin – an' go needle huntin' in this haystack."

There was a silence. Ramesh was looking mournful. Cady

was looking at Kirsty, who was staring down at the varnished table in front of her.

"Howard Godfrey."

"Who?"

She looked up. "He's the US Consul in Dar es Salaam That's very close to Zanzibar."

" 'Bout twenty miles," Cady confirmed.

"And we can get there at least a day before Lascelles arrives in Zanzibar."

"Bet on it."

She made up her mind and stood up. "OK. We go straight to Dar es Salaam. Howard will know what to do. Garret's a US citizen. My Government will get him out!"

Cady slid Ramesh a look and Ramesh said,

"Kirsty, Okello's not going to admit that he has Garret. And I don't know what influence your Government has in Zanzibar."

She looked down at them and said, "He's a good friend of mine – and we're a powerful country. He'll do something." Briskly she added, "Besides, what are the alternatives? Go searching for Lascelles or straight to Zanzibar and say to that animal, 'Please Field Marshal give me back my son.' "

She was suddenly vibrant and confident.

"As long as we get to Dar es Salaam before Lascelles gets to Zanzibar I'm sure Howard can do something."

There was logic to it, and the alternatives were bleak Ramesh stood up, looked at Cady and said briskly,

"What revs can we safely run the Perkins at?"

Cady sucked air in through his teeth. "Hell, we'll run 'er at max. Jack did a hell of a job. I'll sit in the goddam engine room with a can of oil and a spanner an' nurse her all the way."

"Good " Ramesh was assertive. "Meanwhile I am remembering an old stay sail which I think is in the fo'c'sle locker. We'll fly that; if the wind holds on the beam it will help – only a fraction – but still a help."

Cady put his hands on the table and pushed himself to his feet. The effect of shock had left him weak. He grinned at Ramesh.

"OK, Skip, go push the throttle. I'll check the engine."

They moved round the table, Kirsty and Ramesh heading for the companionway and Cady to the engine room. Abruptly Ramesh stopped.

"What do we do with Carlo's body?"

Cady didn't hesitate "Slide him over the side. Say a prayer if you want, but remember he helped deliver Garret to that goddam vampire – an' tried to kill us." He looked at Kirsty and saw her nod. To Ramesh he said, "Want me to do it?"

Ramesh shook his head and a small smile twitched at his lips. "No, that's a Master's duty By the way, Cady, what you did back there was the bravest thing I've ever seen."

"Yes," Kirsty agreed "It's thanks to you we know where Garret is – and why."

Suddenly Cady was embarrassed. He looked down and coloured slightly and mumbled, "Hell . didn't even think Stupid really " His head came up and he looked at Ramesh and said, "Well, you saved my goddam skin. You got a mean right arm with a harpoon. From now on I'm gonna call you Cap'n Ahab."

They both smiled and Ramesh said,

"Cady, for an oil driller you are definitely over-educated."

25

It was, without question, the worst moment of Howard Godfrey's life. It contrasted acutely with his delight when ten minutes earlier Kirsty had burst into his office past his secretary calling out, "Howard! We know where Garret is!"

After hastily introducing Ramesh and Cady she poured out her story, and when she came to Zanzibar and Okello Howard got the same feeling in his stomach as when a plane starts to descend too abruptly. She finished and leaned forward, watching him intently.

Slowly, but with his mind racing, he reached for the phone and spoke into it.

"Get me the Ambassador – urgent."

A pause while his eyes studied Kirsty's anxious face, then "Hi, Frank. I just have word that we have a national in Zanzibar held personally by Okello . . . Yeah, several months. It's very bizarre – and urgent. Can I see you right away? Yeah, the mother is here and two friends . . . OK. Can we have Richards in . . . ? and I guess Murphy? OK." He pushed a button on the phone console and after a moment said, "Godfrey here. Please ask Mr Richards and Mr Murphy to go to the conference room urgently."

He cradled the phone, took a deep breath and said, "Kirsty, it's wonderful and extraordinary that Garret is alive and you found out where. I apologise profoundly for my scepticism . . . However, I must tell you that he is in just about the worst place he could possibly be."

She started to speak but he held up his hand

"Wait. In a moment we go into a meeting with the Ambassador, our ex-Consul in Zanzibar and Murphy . . . who is . . . well, sort of unofficial."

"You mean CIA?" Cady asked.

Howard shrugged. "Let's just say unofficial. We'll put our

heads together and try and come up with something . . . but it's not going to be easy for all kinds of reasons which you'll hear about at the meeting."

Kirsty looked exhausted. The others reasonably fresh.

"You made a fast passage?"

Ramesh nodded. "We averaged close to two hundred miles a day – motor and sail. We're OK, but Kirsty hardly slept."

Kirsty said impatiently, "I'll sleep when Garret is safe. Howard we don't have much time. We might only be a few hours ahead of Lascelles."

"I know. Let's go."

They sat around a large conference table. At one end of the room, the stars and stripes hung down from a tall pole. Next to it, on the wall, was a large colour photograph of President Johnson wearing a confident smile.

Again Kirsty poured out her story. The Ambassador and Richards remained silent but Murphy, a beefy, red-headed man, occasionally interjected to clarify a point. When Kirsty came to the part about Okello having a rare blood group and a disease which required him to have frequent transfusions, he nodded slightly.

Kirsty finished and waited, her eyes on the Ambassador. He was tall and very thin, with sparse black hair combed carefully across his balding pate. He was looking at Howard and said,

"Tell me I didn't just hear a fairy story."

"Look here!" Ramesh said angrily, but the Ambassador lifted a hand.

"Tell me, Howard!"

Howard sighed. "It's true, Frank. Lascelles reported Garret missing on February 13th. You were up in Arusha at the time . . ."

"Yeah, I remember the report."

"Another thing," Murphy said. "We've been hearing rumours that Okello has a rare disease. We thought our informants might be indulging in wishful thinking . . . but this seems to confirm it."

"That man's a lunatic," Richard muttered.

"Well?" Kirsty demanded, looking at the Ambassador. "what are you going to do?"

The Ambassador's brow was wrinkled in thought. He glanced first at Howard and then Murphy, his lips pursed, then he said:

"Mrs Haywood, would you and your friends please wait outside for a few minutes?"

"We haven't much time!" Kirsty repeated vehemently.

"I know," the Ambassador said soothingly. "It won't take long – please."

It took twenty minutes. They waited in an anteroom with Kirsty in a fever of impatience. Occasionally through the closed door they could hear muffled voices raised in anger.

When Howard opened the door and gestured for them to enter his face was still angry.

Kirsty sat down with a feeling of great foreboding. Without preamble the Ambassador said: "Mrs Haywood, the current situation in Zanzibar is as follows: President Nyerere of Tanganyika, a reasonable and moderate man, is the nominal president of Zanzibar as well, since the so-called union. However, he has absolutely no power or control of what goes on there. The island is ruled, if one could call it that, by a revolutionary council, the head of which is one Abdul Karume. He is reasonably moderate but again has no power. 'Field Marshal' Okello, who seemed to come from nowhere, is Minister of Defence and Chief of the Armed Forces. He has all the real power although that may change in the near future. Karume and others on the Council are manoeuvring to replace him, but they do so carefully. He is cunning and sadistic and they fear for their lives. Everyone does on that island."

He paused and took a sip of water from the glass in front of him.

"Now, under normal circumstances, if an American citizen is detained without just cause by a foreign country, we protest to that government and demand his or her immediate release. If that is not quickly forthcoming we bring pressure to bear: either economic or through third party countries, or on rare occasions in a military way. In this case, however,

none of these pressures apply Since the revolution we have had no economic ties at all with Zanzibar The only third party countries which might have an influence there are all communist and unlikely even to believe the story, let alone be sympathetic. The military aspect is out of the question. Even if it was considered, the nearest US military units are thousands of miles away."

Kirsty's face had reflected her increasing gloom during this monologue.

"So what do we do?"

With a sigh and a glance at the others the Ambassador said, "I have decided to go personally to see President Nyerere."

"But you said he has no control over there."

"That's true but he has some influence, at least with Karume. The problem is that even if we wanted to protest to the Revolutionary Council we would have to do it through the British who represent our interests there."

Incredulously Kirsty asked, "We don't have anyone there at all?"

The Ambassador was looking embarrassed. "No. A few days after the Sultan was overthrown I received instructions from the State Department to make every effort to get on friendly terms with the new authorities. We had a very expensive satellite tracking station there – an important link for the space programme. I telephoned Richards and . well we used an unfortunate expression. He said that a Consul was not senior enough to make an impression on those people. I told him to start the process and, as soon as possible, I'd send over some bigger guns . . . Well Okello's people were listening in and misunderstood the expression. He immediately broke off relations and expelled Richards and every other American on the island."

There was a silence and then Cady could not help it. He laughed.

"Sorry," he said to Kirsty "But it's so goddam ridiculous!"

She hardly seemed to hear him. Her face showed she was close to tears. She said to Howard, "What do you think?"

He spread his hands resignedly.

"Kirsty, it's a terrible situation. The fact that Garret is being secretly held makes it damned difficult."

Her eyes shifted to Murphy He was sitting hunched over, the fingers of one hand tapping the table rhythmically beside a yellow legal pad. There were lines and arrows drawn on it as though he had been doodling. She looked back at the Ambassador, who said, "It's really our only alternative Mrs Haywood and, I might add, the correct one from a diplomatic point of view."

Ramesh, silent until now suddenly said, "While we were outside we were hearing arguments in here. Were there other suggestions?"

The Ambassador gave him a less than pleased look and said,

"Of course, we examined every single possibility and naturally there were a variety of opinions These were distilled into my final decision."

"What opinions?" Kirsty asked.

The Ambassador looked uncomfortable.

"I think that is not relevant. As I say, we touched all bases before . . ." He never finished.

Kirsty erupted. "He's my son!" she screamed at him. "That bastard is taking his blood like a vampire and you talk about relevance!"

He visibly flinched. Kirsty looked at the other Americans for support. Richards was looking studiously down at the table. Murphy and Howard were looking directly at her. Almost imperceptibly Murphy was nodding his head.

Howard said, "Frank, she has a point."

"Damn right I do!" she was glaring at the Ambassador. He took a deep breath, expelled the air in a sigh, and said, "OK. Mr Murphy here suggested a rescue plan. He thinks he might know where Okello is holding your son. After some discussion I had to veto it."

"Why?"

He sighed again. "Mrs Haywood. I know this is going to sound heartless to you, but you must remember that my job is to promote good relations with this country. It has not been easy, but I won't bore you with the problems. Now, for Murphy's plan he would have to use his own people – all

Americans – there are no mercenaries in this area. You can imagine they are not popular here. Mr Murphy has three . . . um . . . associates here and he planned to fly in four or five more from Kenya and Uganda this afternoon. Problem is that the risk element is too great. If one American is killed, or worse – captured – the outcry throughout East Africa would be immense. Imagine it. The US meddling again. They would conclude that we were trying to assassinate the new leadership there, who are mostly communists if they're anything. It would set back our relations a whole decade."

Fiercely Kirsty said, "And my son's life – an American life – is not worth it?"

"I'm sorry Mrs Haywood, but we don't even have proof that your son is alive – just the word of a man who was dying – a criminal."

The implications of his words stunned Kirsty into silence, but not Cady. Scornfully he said, "So you go, cap in hand, to Nyerere and say 'Please sir, Mr Okello is holding one of our citizens prisoner and using him as a blood bank. Please slap his wrist and tell him to give him up!' " He snorted. "Okello's been killin' people for months. Nyerere could have sent his army in any time. There were Africans dyin' there – even Tanganyikans. Nyerere did nothin' to save his own people. You think he's gonna move to try an' save one American?"

The Ambassador said nothing but his set face showed his determination.

Suddenly Ramesh spoke up. "Well, you can forbid Mr Murphy to try a rescue, but you cannot stop us – and we have guns." He looked at Cady, who nodded vigorously.

"Forget it," Murphy said kindly. "There's only two of you. I was gonna use eight guys – all highly trained. That's the minimum."

"We are four," Kirsty said, her eyes more animated.

"Who's the other one?"

"A Chinese girl. She's back on the boat. They wouldn't let her land because she has no papers."

Murphy was shaking his head, half in awe and half in negation. He said, "Excuse me, Mrs Haywood. I admire your guts – all of you. But Jeez! Two guys – sorry Mr Patel – one who's middle-aged, and two women. That island's

swarming with armed men Hell, they're not trained much but they all carry guns – and use 'em at the drop of a hat. It's true – my plan was risky – and I was going in with a skilled team."

"You think you know where he's holding Garret?" Cady asked.

Murphy glanced at the Ambassador, who was looking bemused by this turn of events.

"Sure. In fact if he is on that island I'm pretty certain."

"Where?"

"Wait," the Ambassador said sharply "This is crazy – you'll all get killed."

"It's our decision," Kirsty said. "I can't speak for the others but I'd risk my life to save Garret – I'd risk it a thousand times." She looked at Howard. He studied her closely and then said to the Ambassador, "They have the right to try. Murphy could give them advice and maybe help with some untraceable equipment. They'll have to go in tonight or it might be too late. You could delay seeing the President until the morning."

Murphy was muttering, "Crazy – you're crazy!"

The Ambassador's brow wrinkled in thought. Then he nodded and stood up.

"Very well, but I cannot be any party to it. Murphy, whatever help you give is to be on a personal basis – and hear this. Neither you nor any of your people are to set foot on Zanzibar, or go into its territorial waters." He turned to Kirsty and his voice softened. "Mrs Haywood. I'm profoundly sorry that the circumstances make it impossible for me to be more positive. Whatever happens I will see the President first thing in the morning and be assured that I will make the strongest possible representation. Personally I get on well with him. I shall bring as much pressure to bear as I can."

She nodded indifferently and, with a final hard look at Murphy, he left them.

"So what guns have you got?" Murphy asked dubiously.

Cady said, "An old Sten and a Walther Pl revolver."

Murphy sighed. "That ain't exactly massive fire power." He glanced at his watch and turned to Howard. "This is gonna be behind the back teeth, right?"

"Right!" Howard echoed.

"OK. It's just before noon, so we have a bit of time." He picked up the phone, jabbed at a button and after a moment said, "Ray, bring the Okello file up here and relevant maps an' charts." He hung up and, with another glance and a wink at Howard, said:

"Matter of fact we did have a plan to knock off the 'Field Marshal'. He's turnin' that island into a commie hotbed. Goddam Cubans an' Chinese pouring in." He grimaced. "Anyway that plan was also vetoed, but all the groundwork was done an' it'll be a help – but I still think you're nuts." His voice became brisk. "Still, we'll try and give you a one per cent chance. I'm gonna fix you up with some Sten guns mark 6s." He grinned. "The British left them with the Tanganyika army an' some of them rapidly appeared on the black market. Point is, they're very effectively silenced, an' if you have to leave 'em behind, suspicion will fall on the Tanganyika army. Later I'll take you somewhere I know 'an you can practise with 'em. I'll also get you some grenades from the same source. I tell you, the guys around here don't like big bangs. Last year when the army mutinied Nyerere called in the Brits to help. They sent one helicopter over the main barracks an' lobbed out a few thunder flashes. Within minutes five thousand mutineers had dropped their weapons and headed for the bush – end of mutiny. The grenades'll be useful on the way out."

There was a tap on the door and it opened to reveal a man in his late twenties wearing a button-down shirt and look of expectation.

Murphy introduced him merely as 'Ray' and five minutes later they were poring over maps and photographs. Murphy put a finger on a large-scale map of Zanzibar at its south-west coastline.

"Right here there's a big Moorish-style villa. U'sed to belong to a relative of the Sultan. Okello took it over. It's pretty isolated an' that's rare on Zanzibar, which has a dense population. Okello only visits it twice a month. He drives the thirty odd miles from Zanzibar city on Wednesday evenings, stays the night an' drives back in the mornin'. We figured he had a woman there. He's regular as clockwork. It's guarded

twenty-four hours by about a dozen so-called militia men, but our information is that the guard detail is pretty sloppy."

He glanced at Kirsty. "Now he's not gonna keep your son in a prison where because of his colour he'd stand out. No. He's gonna keep him tucked away real quiet – maybe others too, if he's found any."

Kirsty nodded, deep in thought. "It makes sense. And he could take a pint of blood every two weeks without Garret suffering ill effects."

Cady was studying the map. He said, "It doesn't look so difficult. It's right on the coast. We bring *Manasa* in to half a mile then go in the rest of the way in the dinghy."

Murphy shook his head sadly. "No can do buddy. There's a problem – an' that's why my plan called for a minimum of eight men." He pulled a chart across and pointed. "That villa stands on top of sheer cliffs – 'bout two hundred feet high. At the bottom there's jagged rocks out to about fifty feet. Those cliffs run 'bout a mile each side of the villa. Sure, skilled commandos might do it but I wouldn't let my guys try it – an' you wouldn't have a hope."

Cady's face fell. "So what was your plan?"

Murphy pointed again. "See here, a mile an' a half north of the village of Jembiani. There's a small beach. I was gonna land there." His finger traced across the map. "It's about two miles to the villa. You have to skirt an army post here. Gettin' to the villa shouldn't be a problem – but gettin' back to the boat is another story – a horror story. Soon as the shootin' starts that barracks is gonna spout out militiamen. There's another one 'bout two miles north of the villa. They'll be swarmin' all around in minutes."

"So how were you goin' to get out?"

Murphy's finger moved inland. "I was gonna create a diversion here in the clove plantation. Whole series of bombs timed to go off at intervals – in a line goin' inland. Also a few rockets an' the like. Then I was gonna have three guys covering our retreat between the barracks an' the shore; one more at the beach an' four in the assault force." He looked up at Cady. "See what your problem is? Even countin' the two women, you're four men short."

For a long time Cady studied the chart. There was a long

reef marked about two miles off the coast with several wide channels.

"What's the prevailing wind?" he asked.

"South-east this time of the year."

Suddenly Cady grinned. Kirsty and Ramesh were watching him closely.

Kirsty asked, "You've got a plan Cady?"

He nodded and pointed to a gap in the reef. "We bring *Manasa* in through here just north of Jembiani. Then we move up inside the reef until we're opposite the beach We close the shore to about half a mile Ramesh and I land in the dinghy. You an' Lani take *Manasa* back out and head north. When Ramesh an' I get close to the villa we signal you with a light. You come in under sail an' anchor *Manasa* just off the rocks. Ramesh an' I assault the villa and get Garret out."

"An' then?" Murphy interjected.

Cady straightened up. "An' then we go from the cliff top to *Manasa*."

They were all looking at him as though he was mad. In unison Murphy and Ray asked, "How?!"

Cady grinned widely and said, "A Geronimo line!"

"What in hell's that?" Murphy asked.

"It's what a derrick man uses to get his ass off a rig if it blows in. He's got seconds before the flames fry him. As he takes off it's kinda customary to yell 'Geronimo!' "

"How's it work? How do you attach it to the boat?"

"No problem," Cady said, still grinning. "I'll need some very strong, lightweight rope and the use of a good workshop for a couple of hours. Can do?"

"Sure." Murphy was looking down at the chart. "Listen Cady. You get from those cliffs down to a boat, an' any time after you need a job – you come see me, you hear?" He shook his head in awe and growled, "Goddam Geronimo line!"

26

They went to their bunks for three hours. It was at Murphy's insistence. They had returned to *Manasa* at five o'clock, and Ramesh and Cady were almost as exhausted as Kirsty.

Before leaving the Embassy they had worked out a meticulous timetable. They had decided to make the assault at 4.00 a.m, when it was hoped that even the guards on duty would be asleep.

Working back from that time they calculated to leave Dar es Salaam at 9.00 p.m, and allow four hours to reach the coast off Jembiani. They would take an hour to prepare the boat and then land Ramesh and Cady on the beach.

From the Embassy Murphy had driven them to the outskirts of the city and introduced them to an Indian called Pandit. He was the owner of a small fleet of buses, and had a dirty but well equipped workshop. For the next hour Murphy and Ramesh helped Cady to weld several lengths of steel into four T-bars. They would only need three, but he wanted to take one along as a spare. At the vertical end of the 'T' he welded on a curved bracket which held a small rimmed metal wheel. Behind the bracket he screwed in a device that looked a bit like hinged handle-bars. He had covered the metal with black masking tape and then turned the 'T' upside down and explained the principle; "They're makeshift but they're gonna work. It's a bit like the T-bars they use to pull skiers up the slope – only the other way round." He spun the wheel. "This goes on top of the rope. The bracket holds the rope in." He put the cross piece between his legs and under his thighs and gripped the hinged handle-bars.

"Then you push off. The rope has a certain amount of slack an' for the first thirty or forty feet you go straight down – it's a bit hairy. Then as the slack's taken up you shoot out. That's when you start usin' the brake." He brought the

hinged handle-bars closer together. "The join closes in on the rope an' slows you down. You keep applyin' pressure till you hit the water. I guess 'bout twenty feet from the boat. Ideally we oughta practice but there ain't time. I just hope Ray gets good strong rope."

Murphy had sent Ray on a shopping trip. He was to pick up the rope, two hundred-yard lengths of thin, strong twine, two solid rubber balls about four inches in diameter, two gallons of black paint, some long lengths of black cloth and black clothing in various sizes.

They loaded the T-bars into the boot of Murphy's car and drove ten miles out of the city on the coast road towards Lindi Murphy watched the right side of the road carefully, then he spotted it, and turned on to an overgrown track. The car bumped and slid for another mile up a slight hill. They topped it and were looking into a scrub-covered valley Just under the rim of the hill, Ray was standing next to an old Dodge.

"Got it all?" Murphy asked, as he climbed out.

"Sure." Ray moved to the back of the Dodge. He opened the spacious boot and they crowded round and Murphy checked off the items. Then he tapped a metal box.

"Grenades," he said. "A dozen British fragmentation 36s Pity you can't practise with a couple but the noise might attract attention. I'll show you how to use them later." He grinned. "The principle's pretty damn basic."

Next to the box was a long, thick, cloth bundle. Murphy unwrapped it, revealing the black barrels of three Sten guns. They had dull brown wooden butts and brass butt plates, and pistol grips. A canvas guard was strapped around the silencer and Murphy explained that without it the silencer could become hot enough to burn a hand He showed them how to strip the guns down and reassemble them. Then he unwrapped another bundle and took out a dozen magazines.

"It's the same rate of fire as the mark 2," he said. "So keep the bursts real short."

For the next half hour they practised. First single shots, until they got the feel of the guns, and then bursts. The silencers were remarkably effective, the sounds being akin to stuttering, asthmatic coughs.

Murphy was pleased. As he expected, Cady was a natural, quickly getting used to the awkward pull of the gun and easily bracketing the small bushes he aimed at. Ramesh took a little longer, but soon he too was sending the leaves flying.

It was Kirsty who really astonished Murphy. He had expected her to be alarmed by the kick of the gun, but at her first burst she tucked the butt tight into her shoulder and, with an expression of intense concentration, squeezed the trigger, quickly compensated for the kick, and cut a swathe through a clump of bushes.

Later, back at the car, Murphy said to her, "Lady, I wouldn't like to be at the other end of a fire-fight with you."

She smiled wanly and said, "I just wish I was going with them and not waiting passively on the boat."

Quickly Ramesh said, "You know it's impossible Kirsty. We need at least two people to handle *Manasa*."

"I know," she said grimly and hefted the gun in her hand. "I'd just like to have this in my hands and come face to face with the bastards who have my son."

"Anyway," Murphy said consolingly, "Okello's not likely to be around It's a Friday an' he visits on Wednesdays."

He turned to Ramesh. "OK. Now I take you back to the boat an' I want you all to get some sleep – I know that's gonna be difficult because you're all wound up but you get outta your clothes and into your bunks. It's kinda psychological and even if you don't sleep you'll feel rested. Meanwhile me an' Ray will pick up some more stuff: webbing for the grenades and spare mags, waterproof masked torches an' some small transceivers so you can communicate from the boat to the shore." He paused. "Meanwhile I'm tryin' to locate a guy who could be of real help."

"Who is he?" Ramesh asked.

Murphy shook his head. "If I don't find him it doesn't matter. We'll be at the boat around eight. Don't bother clearing with Customs. We'll grease a few palms an' no one will bother you."

Surprisingly Kirsty did sleep, for a full two hours. It was a shallow sleep and she dreamed a lot – swirling images of faces

and birds and the sea – and a vivid green band across the sky.

But she was rested when she woke to the sound of people moving on the deck above her. Ramesh's bunk was empty. Sleepily she pulled on some clothes and went through into the saloon. Lani was in the galley making sandwiches and coffee. She smiled at Kirsty.

"So you slept?"

"Yes. Don't ask me how!"

"We all did. How do you feel?"

"OK. What's happening?"

"Those Americans arrived, and they brought someone with them."

"Who?"

Lani's smile widened. "Go and see."

Kirsty found the deck crowded. There was Ramesh and Cady, Murphy, Ray and Howard and another man. The only illumination came from the distant lights of the city and at first she couldn't quite make him out, but she moved closer and found herself looking at a small, wizened African. His hair was like grey cotton wool. He was only wearing dirty, much-patched khaki shorts and his thin, spindly legs poked through them like ebony sticks.

Murphy saw her and said, "Ah! Kirsty. Come and meet Salim. He's going with you."

"He is?" Mystified Kirsty approached him and held out her hand. With a gap-toothed grin he took it.

"I was just explaining," Murphy said, and turned back to Ramesh, "Salim hates Okello and his bunch. His only son was working on an Arab plantation before the revolution. On the first night when they were killing all the Arabs his son tried to protect his employer, who apparently was a good man. Well, the mob killed him anyway and his family. Then they killed Salim's son, his wife and five children. The youngest was only two."

Kirsty muttered, "God!" and looked at the old man, who obviously could not understand the words and was still displaying his gap-toothed smile.

"Salim was fishing at the time," Murphy went on, "and got away."

"Fishin'!" Cady exclaimed. "How old is he?"

Murphy grinned. "He's not sure. He thinks about seventy-five. But he's fit an' damned good on a boat – an' what really matters, he knows the waters around Zanzibar like you'd know your own back yard. Bin fishing them since he could stand upright on a boat. Tells me he's often caught lobsters right under that villa. He'll guide *Manasa* through the channel and to the beach. Then he'll take her up an' tuck her in under the cliffs. He speaks some English but not much. You'll have to talk slow an' clearly an' use simple words."

"Good!" Ramesh's voice was overlaid with relief. "I did not say anything but I was truly worried about the navigation. It is a dark night."

"Right," Murphy grunted. "Just leave it to Salim – I reckon he could get you in there blind-folded."

"It also means," Kirsty said with satisfaction, "that I can make the assault with Ramesh and Cady."

They all tried to argue her out of it, but she was totally determined. It was her son and she was damned well going.

"You praised my shooting," she said to Murphy.

"Sure, but . . ."

"And Cady made a spare T-bar so there's no problem – I'm going!"

Cady turned away, cursing himself for making the spare.

"I'm going," Kirsty repeated firmly. "So let's forget it, and get on with other things."

Murphy shrugged and reached for a canvas bag at his feet. He took out three transceivers about the size of two packs of cigarettes.

"These are the latest thing. They're fixed on a wavelength no one else around here would ever use. You keep one on the boat an' one with the assault force. I keep the other one. We'll code name *Manasa* Ram One, the assault force Ram Two, and my party Ram Three. Together with Ray an' Howard I'm gonna be on a fast cabin cruiser just outside the three-mile limit doin' a little innocent night fishin'. You're on your own, but once you get out through the channel we'll be around to help. We'll leave 'bout an hour after you."

He pulled some small rubber-covered torches out of the bag. The glasses had been taped over, leaving small central spaces of varying diameters.

"Use these to find your way around an' signal the boat if the radios fail. Again, test them on the way over." Finally he took out a pair of squat binoculars. "Light intensifying," he said. "Not exactly daylight but they give a good image up to a couple of hundred yards." He glanced at his watch. "Now let's eat and we'll send you on your way."

As they lined up to go down the companionway Howard said to Kirsty, "I told Harriet that I was doing a duty watch tonight. She doesn't know what's going on, for two reasons: first, she'd worry herself half to death; and second, she'd more than likely go over and give our venerable Ambassador a smack in the mouth!"

27

They slipped the moorings just after eight and the *Manasa* motored quietly through the channel and into the open sea.

Salim was at the wheel, peering into the darkness ahead. The forecast had been for a light south-easterly wind, and there was just a slight swell.

As the lights of the city faded behind them the others got busy. First they changed into the black trousers and shirts that Ray had brought. Then they unrolled the mainsail and started slapping black paint on it and also on the dog house

There was a vacuum and Ramesh filled it. Although Cady had done much of the planning and had a forceful character, he was now subdued. Ramesh knew that it was not only fear. Now that the hour was approaching they all felt rising fear. He suspected that Cady was going through a mild crisis of confidence. It was his plan to use the Geronimo line. Of the three making the assault he was the youngest and the fittest and the most experienced in violence. Now, perhaps he was feeling the burden on his shoulders.

The unwieldy sail was getting tangled around the mast and shrouds. Quietly but firmly Ramesh took command, issuing orders and getting them organised. Some of the paint had smeared the deck and Lani murmured, "Poor *Manasa*."

"Not matter," Ramesh said. "We will get it off later, and as for the sails, I need new ones anyway."

They finished the mainsail and re-attached it to the boom. They had got a lot of the black paint on themselves and the old man at the wheel had giggled and pointed a finger at his wrinkled chest.

"Like me now," he said. "Night time no one see you."

They unrolled the genoa and painted it on both sides and, after clipping it back onto the forestay, Ramesh looked at his

watch and said, "We have been gone an hour and a half. Murphy and the others will be on the way. Let's check the radios."

They moved to the afterdeck and Ramesh brought up the radios and torches. He pulled out the aerial of one of the radios, set the volume on three quarters, pressed the button and, feeling a little foolish, said, "This is Ram One calling Ram Three. Do you read me? Over."

He released the button. There was an expectant hush and then Murphy's voice came out of the tiny speaker.

"Ram One, this is Ram Three. Read you loud and clear. What's your position? Over."

Ramesh pushed the button again.

"Frankly I am not knowing. Our friend is steering while we have been preparing Over."

"OK. Let me talk to him."

Ramesh held the radio in front of Salim's face, who looked at it with round, astonished eyes. They grew even bigger when Murphy's voice issued forth, speaking in Swahili. Then Salim grinned and nodded to Ramesh, who pressed the transmit button. Salim spoke several sentences and then nodded again at Ramesh, who said, "OK, Ram Three. Over."

Murphy's voice came back in English. "He says you'll be at the fairway in about five cigarettes." A tinny chuckle, then, "In our time scale that means roughly an hour. Check back with us then. Over."

"OK. I am going to check the other radio "

It worked fine and next they checked the torches, shining the thin beams into the water and selecting the ones they wanted, both for signalling and finding their way in the dark.

An hour later *Manasa* hove to. In the distance they could just see the glow of some lights on the Zanzibar coast. Ramesh had been totally mystified by Salim's navigation. The old man never looked at the compass or even took casual bearings. He had said nothing for an hour and then simply eased off the power, pointed a bony finger at the bow and announced, "Reef channel. Half mile."

They brought up the rolls of black cloth together with the

box of tacks and two hammers with heads covered by canvas. Ramesh and Cady manhandled the dinghy overboard, and Cady dropped into it with one of the hammers. The cloth was unrolled and hung over the side of *Manasa* like a skirt. Kirsty and Lani held the pieces in place while Ramesh hammered tacks through it and into the toe rail. Salim held the dinghy's painter and slowly moved Cady round the sides as he tacked the cloth into place along the waterline. When he finished he rowed out about thirty yards and then circled the boat. Back on board he said to Ramesh,

"*Manasa* looks like a ghost ship. No one's gonna see her from even a hundred yards."

"Good." Ramesh picked up a radio and called Murphy, who told him that they were in position two miles due east of *Manasa*

"OK," Ramesh said. "We are going in now. Over."

"We'll be monitoring your calls," Murphy said. "Good luck."

"Thank you. Over and out."

Ramesh put the radio down and said slowly to Salim, "We go inside the reef."

Salim edged the throttle up and *Manasa* eased forward.

In the darkness none of them even saw the reef. Ramesh marvelled at the old man's confidence and thanked God that he had not had to take *Manasa* through himself, relying only on a bearing from the lights of the village of Jembiani.

After twenty minutes Salim announced, "Inside reef Jembiani one mile."

They put up the wet black sails and cut the engine. There was a ten-knot wind and they sailed silently and slowly north paralleling the coast. Even over the odour of the paint they could smell the aroma of cloves from the inland plantation.

Kirsty, Ramesh and Cady prepared.

They blacked their hands and faces from a tin of ointment that Murphy had provided and slipped into the webbed harnesses and clipped on the grenades and spare magazines for the Stens.

Back on deck Ramesh carefully rehearsed Lani on the anchoring procedure. They had inflated another small dinghy

and he explained again how she was to take the spare anchor out astern and use it to turn *Manasa* broadside on to the cliff. She nodded impatiently, her anxious eyes constantly on Cady's blackened face.

"Don't worry Ramesh. I know what to do. Just be careful – all of you."

Cady picked up a heavy coil of rope and draped it like a bandolier over his shoulder. He put two big skeins of twine and two solid rubber balls into a canvas bag, together with the torches, the radio and the binoculars. The four T-bars were on the deck at his feet.

Ramesh stood next to Salim at the wheel. There was a sliver of moon and he could just make out the darker line of the approaching shoreline. They were coming into it at an angle and again Ramesh wondered how the old man knew where he was.

Ten minutes passed and then Salim turned the wheel and *Manasa* swung to port into the wind and the sails flapped idly.

Salim pointed fine on the starboard bow. "Beach. Half mile."

Ramesh could just make out trees on the shoreline, and a gap in the direction where Salim was pointing. He held a small compass in his hand and quickly took a bearing.

Then they were loading the dinghy and Lani, with tears on her cheeks, was first hugging Kirsty, then Ramesh and finally Cady. She clung like a limpet, sobbing against his chest, until he reached up and gripped her wrists and pulled her arms down. Still holding them he stepped back and looked down at her face; saw her draw a deep breath and steady herself.

"You gonna be all right?" he asked, his face stern

She nodded. "Yes, don't worry. I know what to do - and I'll do it . . . I love you."

His expression softened. "An' I you. We'll call you from the beach."

They all shook hands with Salim and he noticed that while the eyes of the two men were tense, Kirsty's were filled only with eagerness.

They dropped down into the dinghy and, with Cady at the

oars, Kirsty in the stern and Ramesh in the bow, rowed off into the darkness.

At that moment *Jaloud* motored into Zanzibar harbour. It headed straight for the Government jetty and Lascelles, eschewing fine seamanship, banged it alongside and leapt ashore with a line. Twenty minutes later he was in the palace of the former Sultan, face to face with Okello in the reception room.

It was an incongruous setting for two such men. They stood on a priceless Persian carpet under a shimmering crystal chandelier.

Lascelles was dressed in dirty jeans and singlet. Okello, a short, stocky man with a handsome ebony face, was wearing highly polished black shoes, knee-length khaki socks, sharply pressed black shorts and a brown epauletted shirt. Around his waist was a Sam Browne belt with a holstered pistol. Within seconds Lascelles had blurted out his story. Okello seemed unconcerned.

"So what can they do?"

"Dammit – he's an American. I'll bet right now his bitch of a mother's in Dar talking to the American Ambassador."

Okello shrugged. "So what can he do?"

Lascelles drew a breath. "Listen, they find that kid alive and there'll be big trouble. They just need an excuse to jump on you."

"But Lascelles, how can they find him?"

"Look, they're not stupid. Sure as hell they've got agents on the island. They might try a raid – they've got the people. At the very least they'll scream to Nyerere."

Thoughtfully Okello started pacing. Five precise steps, one way to the edge of the carpet, and five back.

"I am having difficulties," he muttered, "with Karume – and others on the Council. They have no stomach for real revolution. That hyena Nyerere backs them. They wish, of course, that he will send in soldiers . . . but he is timid."

"He needs the Americans," Lascelles said hastily. "They give him a lot of aid."

Okello stopped pacing and looked down as if studying the intricate pattern beneath his feet.

"Do you still need the kid?" Lascelles asked nervously.

Okello looked up and smiled. White teeth glinted in the light from the chandelier.

"Not really. Friends in Kenya have found two sisters with the same blood group. Masai girls. They arrive within a few days." His smile widened to a grin. "I'm going to marry them. Masai women are beautiful when you wash the mud off. Clever, no? I'll be married to my blood donors." He gestured at the opulence around him. "They will have a life of luxury and anything they want in return for their blood." He studied Lascelles' face and then said, "So you think the boy should die?"

Lascelles nodded.

"All right. Now he can die." He looked up and smiled again and it was a sight to chill the devil himself. "But first I take all his blood. We will go to the villa with 'Doctor' Bakari and he will first drain his blood." Okello's eyes narrowed in thought. "After four or five pints his heart will give out but the blood will still flow from gravity – about eight or nine pints – so I'm safe if the Masai girls are delayed. Then you can take the body and give the sharks a good breakfast. They are used to flesh now. They have fed well these months."

Lascelles grinned. "When can we go?"

Okello turned and his moderate tone changed abruptly as he shouted towards an open door.

Immediately an African in khaki shorts and shirt appeared in the doorway, his eyes wide with fear.

Okello literally screamed an order at him in Swahili. As he turned and fled Okello, his voice back to normal, said to Lascelles, "We will be there in an hour."

The dinghy scraped on to the sand and Ramesh jumped out, the painter in his hand. He pulled until the bow was on the beach. Cady and Kirsty climbed out and they dragged it up under some palm trees. Ramesh took the radio, turned the volume low and called Lani and told her they were safely ashore. Then he said into the radio, "Ram Three. Do you copy?"

Very faintly they heard Murphy's voice. "We copy. Good luck."

Cady carried the canvas bag and two T-bars. Ramesh the other two. They found a track leading north from the beach and followed it.

Twenty minutes later they were skirting the militia barracks It was now 2.30 a.m. and not a sound issued from the compound.

But they got a fright half a mile further on.

They had just passed a cluster of tin-roofed shacks when a dog started barking. Two others joined in and the sounds grew closer. With Kirsty in the lead they ran quickly, dodging in and out of coconut trees. But the dogs would not be shaken off. They came in close behind, three dark shapes barking loudly. Ramesh dropped the T-bars and turned and unslung his Sten.

"Cady we have to shoot them."

Cady grunted in agreement and moved up beside him, his gun in his hands. Kirsty waited twenty yards up the path, sucking air into her lungs.

It was not necessary. The dogs were close and as soon as they saw the pointed barrels they turned and slithered away. They knew about guns.

Half an hour later Ramesh was lying on his belly on a low ridge studying the villa through the binoculars. They gave a grey but distinct image. It was a low Moorish style building perched right on the edge of the cliff. A covered walkway led to another smaller, square-shaped building behind it – formerly the servants' quarters but now, as Murphy had told them, housing the guard detail. A light showed at one rear window.

Ramesh panned the binoculars looking for movement but saw nothing. He shifted his gaze back to the main entrance and then saw him: a slumped figure sitting on a bench, his back and head resting against the wall – obviously asleep.

Ramesh pushed himself backwards. Kirsty and Cady were hunched down beside him.

"I see only one guard," he said. "And he is asleep."

Cady grunted in satisfaction.

"Let's go rig the line."

Crouching, they moved to the south. About a quarter of a

mile away they located the coconut tree that Cady had noted on their way up It stood about ten yards from the edge of the cliff. The shore at that point formed a slightly concave crescent. Cady took the binoculars and moved up close to the edge. With Ramesh holding the back of his shirt he studied the rocks and sea below Then he backed away.

"Perfect," he whispered "The rocks extend out about thirty yards, then there's unbroken, dead calm water." He raised the binoculars again and looked out to sea. He could see nothing but an opaque grey "Let's signal. Call Lani an' tell her to watch for the light."

Ramesh took the radio and a torch out of the canvas bag. He gave the torch to Kirsty, pointed and said, "When I tell you, show a light there. But very briefly." He pressed the send button on the radio.

"Ram One. This is Ram Two. Do you read? Over."

Immediately he put his hand across the small speaker. A second later they heard Lani's muffled but excited voice

"I hear you Ramesh."

She had forgotten Murphy's careful coaching in radio procedure but none of the three on the cliff top cared about that. Her voice was a link reassuring. Into the radio Ramesh said, "We are going to shine a light Tell me if you see it."

He nodded to Kirsty, who cupped a hand over the top of the torch and flicked the switch. There was a pause and Ramesh said, "Again."

She flicked the switch a second time and a moment later Lani's voice was saying, "I see it! Wait!" Five seconds later she said, "Forty degrees."

Ramesh pressed the button and said softly,

"Good. You are close Come in towards us. Every two minutes we will flash a light. Over and out."

Leaving Kirsty with the torch, Ramesh and Cady moved to the coconut tree. Cady lifted the coil of rope from his shoulder, dropped it beside the tree, picked up one end and shinned up the trunk. About ten feet from the ground he coiled the rope several times around the trunk and knotted it tight. Then he dropped lightly down. He trailed the other end of the rope back to the cliff edge, took the two thick skeins of twine from the bag and the two solid rubber balls. Holes

had been drilled through their centres and he threaded an end of each skein of yarn through a ball and tied them.

Then he took the binoculars and looked down to the sea. He saw the dim grey shape of *Manasa* three hundred yards away moving slowly towards them on a starboard tack. He could just make out the two figures: Lani by the mast and Salim at the wheel. He saw Lani move and then the black mainsail dropped down to the boom.

Five minutes later, as Cady whispered a commentary to Kirsty and Ramesh, *Manasa* glided in close to the rocks. The genoa flapped as Salim turned into the wind and Lani, on the forepeak, lowered the anchor into the sea without the merest splash.

Within minutes she was in the little dinghy dragging a line out from the stern quarter. She lowered the spare anchor about fifty yards from the boat and rowed back.

Cady saw her bend over the winch and slowly *Manasa*'s stern came round until she was lying parallel to the shore.

"Good girl," Cady breathed. "Those anchors will be set in coral and *Manasa*'s steady an' tight." To Ramesh he whispered, "This is the tricky part – I've only got two tries. Let's not make a stupid mistake. Will you hold one end of the rope an' one end of the twine?"

Ramesh nodded and groped around and found both ends Cady picked up the ball attached to the other end of the twine. He had the binoculars in his left hand. To Kirsty he whispered, "Tell her it's comin'."

Kirsty picked up the radio, pressed the button and said, "Lani. Stand by."

Cady heard Lani's faint, "OK. Standing by."

He measured the distance, then lowered the binoculars and took two steps backwards. He weighed the heavy ball in his right hand, lifted it and, with a grunt, hurled it over the cliff.

The twine snaked out into the void. Cady moved forward and raised the binoculars. Beyond *Manasa* he saw, and then faintly heard, the splash. An agonising ten seconds and then Lani's voice from the radio, "Got it!"

With a sigh of relief Cady took the end of the twine from Ramesh and knotted it to the rope. He took the radio from

Kirsty, pressed the button and whispered, "Lani, pull it in. Slowly."

Holding the rope in his hand he watched as the twine unravelled over the cliff. Then he slowly paid out the rope. He held the radio in his right hand and when all the rope was over and suspended six feet above the cliff edge he instructed Lani to stop. He studied *Manasa* through the binoculars: saw Lani crouched at the base of the mast. The rope would be wound round it. To Ramesh he said, "Swing on the rope. Give it all your weight."

Ramesh moved back towards the coconut tree, reached up with both hands, gripped the rope and lifted his feet off the ground.

Cady peered down through the binoculars, saw the rope tighten and *Manasa* heel slightly and move in a few feet closer to the rocks. He turned to see Ramesh holding his legs high, his bottom inches from the ground. Cady grinned and whispered, "The Geronimo line's ready."

Five minutes later, having laid the T-bars out in a neat row under the rope, they were back on the low ridge

Again Ramesh studied the buildings through the binoculars There was no change. The guard was still asleep

He handed the binoculars to Cady, looked at his watch and whispered, "Twenty to four. I suggest we do not wait "

With the binoculars at his eyes, Cady answered, "Hell, no! We can practically walk in." Then he stiffened and said, "Listen! What's that?"

They all heard the sound of the car. They turned to their left and saw the headlights coming up the road Heard the peremptory hooting of the horn. Cady, through his binoculars, saw the guard jerk awake, grab his rifle and stand up, legs apart, an arm wiping his eyes An outside light came on as the car pulled up and they all saw Lascelles and two Africans climb hurriedly out.

"Oh God!" Kirsty said bitterly. "Lascelles. What now?!"

"And Okello," Cady muttered. "I recognise him from that photograph in *Time*."

Lascelles and the two Africans walked past the guard and

into the villa. The guard remained standing stiff-backed, the butt of his rifle next to his right foot. Another light came on in the guardhouse and one in the villa.

"They'll kill Garret!" Kirsty said in panic. "Let's move!"

"Wait," Ramesh cautioned. He was watching the guardhouse door. It opened and a head peered out and called something to the guard. He answered and the head was followed by a body; a tall African wearing only shorts and a holstered pistol. He walked across into the villa.

Ramesh shifted his gaze to the area behind the guardhouse. It was open ground leading to a line of trees which curved around to the other side of the villa.

Kirsty clutched his arm. "Let's go," she pleaded.

"Wait!" Ramesh turned to Cady. "It will take you five minutes to cut back and get behind those trees. I want you on the other side of the villa facing the guardhouse. Kirsty and I will approach from this side. I will shoot the guard at the door and we will go in. Just cover the guardhouse. Shoot anyone who comes out. Once the noise starts throw grenades. Even if there is no one there."

His voice was crisp with purpose and authority. Cady grunted "OK," and slid away into the darkness.

Inside the villa Lascelles, Okello and 'Doctor' Bakari walked down a corridor and came to a steel door. Bakari, who before the revolution had been no more than a male nurse in the local hospital, took out a key and unlocked the door. The African in shorts came running up behind them, his eyes full of sleep.

"Help us," Okello said curtly, and pushed open the door. They went into a room that had been converted into a makeshift clinic. A bed with a white sheet was at one side, a large refrigerator in one corner, a glass fronted cabinet in another. It contained bottles and stainless steel cans. There was another steel door on the far side of the room. Bakari selected a key and opened it. He reached in and flicked on a light.

The room contained just a bed. Above it was a heavily barred window.

There was a young man lying on the bed. He wore a pair

of faded blue boxer shorts. His skin was white from lack of sun. He had a beard unkempt and untrimmed. He raised his head, wiping his eyes with the back of his wrist. His long, matted blond hair fell down to the pillow

Lascelles said, "Hello, Garret."

The young man's blue eyes focused and he recognised Lascelles. Abruptly he sat up and swung his feet to the floor

"What are you doing here?"

Lascelles grinned. "We came for some blood."

Garret stood up. His sleepy eyes were puzzled. He looked at Okello and Bakari.

"But they took it two days ago," he said. "This is Friday."

Okello smiled and said, "But we want more."

Garret backed away from the bed, coming to rest against the wall. He was shaking his head in bewilderment.

"No. It's too soon. Dangerous."

It took the four of them. They manoeuvred him into a corner. He lashed out with his fists, catching Lascelles on the side of his face. Lascelles cursed and kicked him viciously on the knee. Garret collapsed and Bakari and the guard leapt on him as Lascelles turned away holding a hand to his face.

Three minutes later Garret was lashed to the bed. A thin rubber tube ran from his left arm to a large glass bottle on the floor. He watched in consternation as Bakari took two more bottles from the cabinet and put them next to the first

"What are you doing?"

Lascelles, still holding the side of his head, was fascinated. He watched as the red liquid ran thickly down the side of the bottle. There was already an inch at the bottom. He moved forward and looked down at Garret's anxious face

"We're taking it all, kid – every last drop!"

At first Garret failed to comprehend but then, as he looked up into Lascelles' sneering, sadistic face, his eyes widened in terror.

Okello was watching the flowing blood intently

Lascelles grinned down at Garret. "Yeah kid – every drop. Blame that bitch mother of yours. She hounded me right across the Indian Ocean – an' now you're gonna die – in just a few minutes. Then I toss you over the cliff an' the sharks get their meal – finally."

Garret was straining against the cords, twisting and pulling, his teeth clenched in effort.

"Where's my mother?" he gasped.

Lascelles' grin widened.

"She's close kid . . . but too late."

He stood back and watched the writhing moaning figure on the bed – and the steady rise of red in the bottle.

Garret arched his back and screamed.

Ramesh and Kirsty had crept close. Twice they had flattened themselves to the ground as the guard had shuffled his feet restlessly and glanced around him. Now they were twenty yards away. Ramesh raised his Sten gun. He could feel his heart pumping, the copper taste of fear in his mouth. He was still uncertain whether he could do it when the silence of the night was rent by the piercing scream.

He froze, the muzzle of the Sten half raised. Beside him he heard Kirsty's answering scream.

"Garret!!!"

Then he heard the stuttering cough of Kirsty's Sten and the guard was spinning, his rifle dropping into the dust. Kirsty was moving, a black wraith sprinting for the door. Ramesh's head cleared and he followed.

As he reached the entrance he heard sounds behind him. He twisted to see the door of the guardhouse open. Men rushing out, guns in their hands. Instinctively he raised his gun but again he was too late. He first saw the chips of stone flying off the wall near the door and then the men jerking and spinning like marionettes. He turned back and ran into the villa; caught a flash of black as Kirsty turned a corner.

In the clinic there was a log jam at the door as Lascelles, Bakari and the guard tried to get out. Okello, cunning and cautious, waited, backing against a wall by the door. The guard, pistol in hand, pushed through first. Bakari followed. Lascelles had just got his head out when he saw Kirsty ten yards away. Saw the black muzzle flickering white, heard the bullets thunking into flesh. Saw Bakari and the guard hammered down in the corridor. He ducked back into the room, his eyes glazed with terror. Beyond the bed was a window. Ignoring Okello he ran towards it.

Kirsty flashed in through the door. Saw first her son strapped to the table and, beyond him, Lascelles. She did not see Okello slip out behind her.

She screamed, "Lascelles!" and he turned and saw the black barrel aimed at his chest. He threw up his hands, sobbing "No! No!"

Then he heard the click as the pin came against an empty chamber. It echoed in his brain. He saw the rage in her eyes as she clutched for a new magazine. He turned and launched himself at the window and splintered through it.

Ramesh had turned the corner and seen Okello scuttling through the door. He raised his gun and fired a burst, but it pulled high, chipping plaster off the wall. Okello sprinted for a door at the end of the corridor. As he reached it Ramesh fired again and saw him twist and go down on his knees. Again he fired, but his first bursts had been too long. He fumbled for a new magazine; saw Okello rise, open the door and stagger through. Ramesh was opposite the clinic door. He glanced in. Saw the blond boy on the bed; Kirsty beyond it at the window, firing out into the night.

'Okello!' Ramesh thought. 'He'll be mine.' He clicked the magazine into place and ran to the door. It opened on to a walled garden. In the dim light he could see Okello on the far side, his elbows on the wall. He pulled himself up and got one leg over and most of his body. Ramesh raised his gun, took aim and fired the entire magazine at the remaining leg. Saw the chips fly off the wall, bracketing the leg, heard Okello's scream of pain and terror, and the leg disappeared from sight.

Ramesh moved forward and then paused. Through his rage he heard Kirsty's sobs. He turned and ran to the clinic.

At the front of the building Cady had been wreaking havoc. As men poured out of the guardhouse he lobbed grenades, killing most and driving the rest back inside. Then, in a state bordering on euphoria, he rushed the building itself, firing his Sten gun from the hip. He tore through it, firing bursts into all the rooms. Then ran out through the back door. Great loping strides, changing the magazine as he went. Someone was firing at him from the line of trees: he saw the

muzzle flashes; heard the bullets whipping past. At least three guns.

He charged, firing the Sten until the magazine was empty. He pulled out a grenade, snatched out the pin and hurled it, ducking low and following. In the flash of the explosion he saw bodies blown back into the trees and figures running in blind panic He was at the edge of the trees, crouched listening, hearing only running feet and bodies crashing through the undergrowth. Then firing from the main building. He turned and saw a window explode and a figure hurtle out of it amid shards of glass. It rolled and gained its feet and ran towards Cady, ducking and weaving. Cady saw Kirsty at the window. Saw the muzzle flashing of her gun and ducked as the bullets chopped the leaves above his head.

The figure reached the trees, ducked down into the darkness and began to crawl, blood streaming from his face, panting with fear, into the undergrowth. Just at the moment when he thought he must have made it he raised his head and was looking into Cady's eyes two feet away.

Lascelles struggled to his knees and begged "He's alive. It wasn't my fault. He's with his mother. It's over! It's over!"

"Where's Okello?"

"I'll take you to him. Help me."

Cady bent to help Lascelles to his feet, but didn't see the short knife. All he remembered was a stinging pain.

Instinct – and wrestling the weapon from him. Lascelles kicking and gouging.

Cady drew his legs up protectively, his chin tucked into his shoulder. Looked into his eyes.

Lascelles saw death.

The knife travelled up through the stomach and into the heart.

Ramesh arrived at the clinic to find Kirsty leaning over the bed. She had a scalpel in her hand, slashing at the cords. He moved to help her but she was oblivious.

She cut the last cord and Garret was sitting up and mother and son were locked in each other's arms, both sobbing with relief.

Ramesh clicked a fresh magazine into his Sten. He heard another explosion from the front of the building and he put his arms between them and prised them apart. He grabbed Kirsty by the shoulders and shook her.

"Cady!" he shouted. "I'm going to help him. Follow carefully."

He left them and ran down the corridor and hall to the entrance and almost crashed into Cady rushing in.

"What happened?" Cady demanded.

"He's all right. They're behind me. Lascelles got away."

"He didn't. I killed the bastard!"

"You OK?"

"Just creased. It's nothing."

Ramesh slapped him on the shoulder. "What about the guards?"

Cady grinned. "Runnin' like rabbits. But others will be comin' soon."

They turned and saw Kirsty with her arm around Garret. Immediately Ramesh said, "Help her Cady. I'll go ahead – wait until I call."

In a crouch he ran through the door There was no one to be seen. He sprinted for the ridge and, reaching it, turned; gun tucked against his shoulder, eyes searching the darkness for movement – nothing.

"Come on!" he shouted.

They came through the door Cady had an arm around Garret's waist, half lifting him off his feet; Kirsty running behind.

Three minutes later they were at the coconut tree. A siren wailed and shouts came from behind the villa.

Garret leaned against his mother while Cady slipped a T-bar on to the rope.

Ramesh grabbed the radio, pushed the button and said, "Lani, we have him! Stand by, we come down!"

Cady was pushing the T-bar between Garret's legs, trying to explain to him what he should do, but he was dazed, his eyes blank. The shouting was getting closer.

In frustration Cady said, "I'll take him down."

"Yes," Ramesh said "I'll bring up the rear. Go Cady "

Cady pushed the T-bar through his own legs and pulled

Garret across in front of him, clamping him down with his elbows. Then he duck waddled to the edge of the cliff and, as Kirsty screamed, launched over it.

A bullet cracked overhead and Ramesh grabbed another T-bar, slung it on the rope and pushed Kirsty across it. Instinctively she grasped the handles. He pushed her to the edge of the cliff. Another bullet spurted dirt near their feet. She turned to look at him, anguish in her eyes. He gave her another push and she was gone. She dropped like a stone, her mind filling with terror. Then as the slack was taken up she shot out a few feet above the rocks. She saw the vague black outline of the *Manasa* and remembered to close the handles. As she hit the water she was thinking of Ramesh back on the cliff. Then she was kicking away from the T-bar and swimming the few yards to the ladder on *Manasa*'s side. Cady was leaning over, a strong hand pulling her up; and then Lani was throwing her arms around her.

On the cliff Ramesh was about to loop the last T-bar over the rope when there came a burst of automatic fire. He felt the two bullets hit him, one across his waist, the other creasing his thigh. He twisted and fell, hearing yells of excitement. The Sten was in his left hand. He pulled himself to a sitting position, raised the gun and waited. He saw them when they were ten yards away. A row of five moving cautiously, peering into the darkness.

He remembered all the instructions even as he saw the flash of a muzzle and a bullet whipped past his ear. He held the gun steady, tight against his shoulder, and, like plucking a ripe plum, squeezed the trigger. He traversed the barrel and hosed the entire magazine at the advancing line and saw them go down like skittles, screaming.

Below on *Manasa* they stood on the stern hearing the shots and peering anxiously up into the darkness.

"Please," Kirsty whispered. "Please Ramesh. Come down! Don't leave me now."

Cady had just put an arm round her shoulders when the exuberant shout floated down: "Geronimooo!"

28

There had been too many farewells and Ramesh was tired of them. In a two-month period he had said goodbye to more people than he had met in the preceding forty-eight years of his life.

But he made a great effort to be pleasant to Murphy and Ray and Howard, Harriet and Lester. During the past month they had showered him with kindness.

They all stood on *Manasa*'s deck, with glasses in their hands – Murphy had brought along a bottle of champagne. Howard raised his glass and said, "To a good voyage."

They all echoed the sentiment and drank. Ramesh looked at his watch.

"Sure," Murphy said. "You'll want to clear the land by nightfall. Come on folks!"

The men all shook his hand warmly and slapped him on the shoulder. Lester shook his hand shyly and Ramesh was still embarrassed to see the hero worship in his eyes. Harriet hugged him warmly and kissed him on both cheeks.

They climbed on to the jetty, cast off his lines and stood waving as *Manasa* pulled away. They waved for ten minutes until he passed out of sight around the curve of the channel.

Half an hour later *Manasa* was heeling and heading due east in a steady force three. Ramesh had decided not to go north up the East African coast. He felt the need for a long spell away from land – and from people. Needed time to recover – and commune with himself. He would head out into the Indian Ocean for four hundred miles, and then turn due north. He would make his first landfall at Mogadishu on the horn of Africa; a voyage of almost a thousand miles. From there he would push up into the Red Sea and on to the Suez Canal, and then to Cyprus. Afterwards? He did not know.

His emotions were numb. He remembered one of the 'bird

men' telling him that sometimes on Aldabra a tortoise would roam too far foraging for food in the morning and find itself at noon, stranded away from the shade. It invariably died of sunstroke. He felt a kinship. Right now he was racing for the shade of solitude.

Away to his left, over the horizon, lay Zanzibar. He had deliberately chosen his course so that he would not see it. But he felt its presence. The few hours he had spent on its soil had represented the apex of his life and his present instability.

Inevitably his thoughts swung back a month to that apocalyptic night and its aftermath. His reaction to fear. The realisation that he, Ramesh Patel, ex *babu* of Bombay, had faced the ogre of death and fired back, had instilled within him a serene confidence. But the aftermath of that night had left him with deep emotional scars.

They had pulled him, bleeding, up on to *Manasa*'s deck. He had felt only a stinging on the side of his stomach, but one of the last bullets had gouged a track through his flesh, and he bled copiously until Kirsty had padded and bound the wound.

Old Salim had guided *Manasa* out through the reef and waiting there was Murphy and the others on the cabin cruiser – certainly well within the three-mile limit. They had escorted *Manasa* to Dar es Salaam as the sun ushered in a new day. Obviously Murphy had been in communication with the Embassy for there was a big reception waiting.

The Ambassador putting on a brave face, Tanganyikan officials, police, doctors and ambulances.

Everything had happened with bewildering speed. Ramesh found himself in hospital. His wounds were dressed and a doctor pronounced him extremely lucky. An inch or two to the right and he could have died.

He went through a period of euphoria Perhaps the pain killers they gave him heightened it. He, Ramesh Patel, had partaken in an extraordinary adventure, and had shared it with three other people, whom he felt were bound to him for ever by the shared experience. They were more than children or parents or lovers. They were fused to him in the furnace of fear and courage and achievement.

And then the reality prevailed.

He knew now that it was totally natural and right The forces that pulled them together were complicated. The emotional priorities dominant.

Garret, through the horror of his kidnapping and confinement, and the shocking trauma preceding his rescue, was badly affected.

Ramesh only spent three nights in hospital. Garret was kept in for close observation Then it was pronounced that he must return to America forthwith to undergo skilled therapy

It all happened so quickly, and in strict tempo. Ramesh's euphoria dissipated. Having found and rescued her son, Kirsty was now deeply concerned that his mental scars should not be permanent. For the moment there could be no time to develop her feelings for Ramesh.

It had been on the second day following the rescue. Kirsty came to his bedside and held his hand.

"You know I must go back. For the moment Garret needs me. You know that Ramesh."

She looked into his eyes. He saw the pain.

"I do understand, and have always understood ever since that night."

Ramesh pulled her closer. "You know how I feel . . . I love you Kirsty."

"Yes, Ramesh, and I love you. But . . ."

"I have accepted your leaving," Ramesh interrupted In sparing her the agony of having to divide her love it was the ultimate act of unconscious kindness.

Now Ramesh wondered whether indeed he did understand, whether he had really accepted. He knew the answer. It hurt. For the first time he recognised the resentment

Apparently the Tanzanian Government was deeply embarrassed by what had happened, and were acutely anxious that no publicity should be released. Okello was lured to Kenya The pretext: a skilled surgeon capable of saving his life. He was declared persona non grata in Zanzibar and Tanganyika. He vanished from sight.

A kind of deal was struck. Howard called it 'reparation'. Anyway, money was involved. Whether it was from the Americans or a grateful Tanzanian Government was immaterial to Kirsty. Her first concern was the future of her

son. Four days after the rescue Ramesh and the others were in a special section of the airport seeing her and Garret off. It was hot and humid.

He only managed a brief moment alone with her. She had clung to him fiercely, tears in her eyes; a moment of deep intimacy drawing their feelings and events of the past weeks into focus.

The moment was shattered as Howard took her arm, insisting that she join the already delayed plane.

Kirsty was gone.

In well concealed anguish he turned to Lani and Cady and drew warmth and pleasure from their love for each other.

Even as they had motored back from Zanzibar on that fateful morning, they had decided to marry.

There had been practical problems. Lani was stateless. Technically she was not even allowed to land on Tanganyikan territory.

Cady had gone to the Canadian High Commission and insisted that she be given temporary papers so that they could marry. The Commission officials rolled out the bureaucratic barriers and then recoiled as Cady's wrath shivered the building.

Eventually it was arranged and at the ceremony in the Anglican church Ramesh gave her away, suffused with paternal pride, his longing for Kirsty momentarily suppressed.

They honeymooned for a week at the Mikumi Game Reserve and insisted that Ramesh accompany them. He had adamantly refused and they told him that if not, they would camp on *Manasa*'s deck. They meant it. So he had gone with them and spent a wonderful week and been an integral part of their happiness.

Cady was going to return to work. They would live on Cyprus. He telephoned his friend Cam, who told him that work was plentiful – even with his old company Aramco. The offending tool pusher had offended once too often and been fired. The word was out that Cady had been wronged and his application to be re-hired would be favourably received.

Diffidently Cady had asked Ramesh if they could travel with him and *Manasa* as far as Cyprus. Scarcely concealing his pleasure Ramesh had quickly agreed.

Then a few days later Lani had conferred privately with Harriet. A visit to a doctor was arranged and shortly afterwards Lani announced that she was pregnant. For two days Cady shambled around like a bear who has found the ultimate honey pot. Then the mantle of imminent parenthood descended over him.

Earnestly he discussed the future with Ramesh. He was down to his last couple of thousand dollars. As a potential father perhaps he should go straight back to work? Earn money to provide for his coming child?

In his paternal role, Ramesh agreed.

Another trip to the airport. Another farewell. Of course he would visit them on Cyprus. It was only a matter of weeks.

Ramesh had immersed himself in activity. It was not difficult. *Manasa* literally swarmed with workers. Early on Howard and Murphy had taken him to one side and explained that 'funds' had been allocated.

The deck and dog house were sanded down and cleansed of the black paint. A new set of sails were measured and cut, equipment was installed: a sophisticated single side-band radio, a depth sounder, a new compass, and an array of instruments. For two days *Manasa* was hauled out of the water while Ramesh stayed with the Godfreys. Her bottom was scraped and her hull painted.

While the boat was slipped Murphy had arrived with an American marine engineer who was in Tanganyika with a US aid mission trying to upgrade the local fishing fleet. He had spent two hours in the engine room in oily affinity with the Perkins. When he emerged on deck, wiping his hands on cotton waste, he asked Ramesh, "Who fixed that old mother up for you?"

Ramesh said, "An Englishman on the Seychelles called Jack Nelson. Is it all right?"

"Believe it!" the American said. "She'll take you there and back and anywhere. The guy's a pro."

In the meantime Ramesh wrote letters. The first was to Jack Nelson, care of the Naval and Military Club in London. It was a long letter telling of everything since *Manasa* had left, and explained his deep love for Kirsty. He gave a return

address of poste restante Djibouti which would be his second port of call after Mogadishu. Then he wrote to the Savys on Bird Island and Dave Thomas, giving them an abbreviated version of the events.

His letter to Jaran Singh in Bombay had been difficult. How could he describe the last two months without his old friend concluding that he had lost all his senses? He contented himself with describing the voyage to the Seychelles and the scenic beauties of the islands and the wildlife.

And then there was the letter to Kirsty. He explained in great detail the trip with Cady and Lani following the wedding, and the announcement of Lani's pregnancy. It took him two days to write the last paragraph. A battle raged between caution and suppressed emotion.

It was the night that did it. It was nearly calm – just a gentle breeze and the sky was like black velvet studded with diamonds. He wanted her with him, and said so.

He had the reply just before he left. It was a long letter devoted mostly to news of Garret. He was responding well to treatment. During long talks he had expressed a desire to study marine biology. Her stories of Aldabra and the other islands had excited him. She was thrilled with his sense of purpose. The 'reparation' money was being invested to cover college fees. Meanwhile she thought she would have to start working again. She would write to him care of Cady in Cyprus. The last paragraphs were filled with words of gratitude and she ended the letter: 'With love, Kirsty'.

On the other side of the world Kirsty was worried. The reason was hard to define. Garret's recovery had been swift and seemingly complete. He had quickly put on weight and the flickering, recessed look in his eyes had faded and been replaced by one of confidence.

The eminent psychologist had been pleased, and had told Kirsty that although Garret would always live with the dark side of the memory, the experience itself may have added to his character.

She saw it herself, clearly. He had left home a restless, introspective, resentful youth. He had returned as a man. For a month as she talked to him, listened to him and, above all,

watched him, she had felt pride, satisfaction and an overwhelming sense of relief.

Garret, their only child, a single egg in a nest. A scrawny down-covered chick that had ventured too close to the rim and tumbled out; spread wings without feathers; spiralled down towards the rocky ground. An instant before impact she had swooped in and plucked him up. No ordeal had ever emerged into such a reward; no scepticism been bludgeoned into such vindication. At times during the first days it had been physical. She found herself touching her son. Fingers, as she passed him a cup of coffee; an arm casually brushing his on a restaurant table; her lips on his cheek in a goodnight kiss.

It had to be physical. For so long he had been a wraith: a dream; a ghost. He had been the vision reflected in every sympathetic gaze, every sceptical eye and every salvo of cynicism.

To touch him was to savour her own redemption.

And they had talked. At first, by his insistence, of her journey and the people collected on her path. He never tired of the stories, the places and the characters, and her reaction to them.

Two weeks after their return to New York he had closeted himself in a bedroom of their rented apartment and emerged hours later with a folder of letters. Silently he gave it to her and she read them: letters to the people she had described. Simple, dignified letters, expressing not only gratitude on his own behalf, but firm and masculine appreciation for the kindnesses they had shown his mother.

Then they had talked about his future.

His own journey, and the stories of hers, had fired him with a love, close to obsession, about the sea and its denizens. He applied to enrol in the University of Florida – to study marine biology. He had done well in high school and that, together with an explanatory phone call to the Dean from a certain gentleman in the State Department, ensured a favourable response.

The semester would start in a week and while he prepared and planned they discussed her future. She would work again. Not at Goldrite Fashions – that was a millennium in

the past. She refused to consider taking any part of the 'reparation'. That was invested for her son's future. She would find any kind of a job. Waiting tables, behind a counter in a store, ticketing in a travel agency. She would not work behind a desk. That was firm in her mind. She would not be a book-keeper. That, too, was in the past. In whatever she did, she would be face to face with people.

As she discussed it with Garret they both knew she was thinking only of her near future – the temporary future. The real horizon – beckoning future, was never discussed. She was looking only to see him settled in college, walking on firm ground.

She was confident but she was worried. She was on a plateau of happiness, but there was a cloud. When she looked into her son's eyes she saw curtains. They were tightly bunched. Held back like the curtains on a stage midway through a play; recessed away from the bright lights. In her mind they were ominous – waiting for the last line of the final act.

She scolded herself for foolishness. The curtains were merely apprehension that in her happiness and redemption something must go wrong. Nothing could be perfect.

But such analysis did not dispel them and finally, one night, while they were having dinner in the apartment, it suddenly struck her with cleaving certainty.

She had been talking about Ramesh again. Somehow the conversation often swung to him. In answer to a question from Garret she had just recounted, yet again, how Ramesh had, with such insouciance, offered to put *Manasa* at her disposal. She looked up into her son's eyes and saw the curtains: no longer bunched, but half drawn. In an instant she realised it. Garret had perceived the depths of her feelings for Ramesh. That was the cloud. After bringing him back to life she was likely, if only mentally, to abandon him for another.

He listened silently, soberly, as she tried to explain. She told him of her feelings for Ramesh, but how they would be subjugated until at least Garret had fashioned his own future. She had not burned all her bridges and gone through mental hell to find her son, only to abandon him.

She finished talking and studied his face anxiously His eyes were cast down at the tablecloth. Achingly she wondered whether her words had been adequate; sufficiently reassuring.

He raised his head and she was looking into the clear, sure eyes of a strong man But curiously they contained tears. His lips moved in a smile, half bemused, half ironic.

"Mom. I love you. I knew that the first time while I was sitting on the dirt floor of a hut in the worst slum in Katmandu. I wasn't feeling sorry for myself – homesick or anything. I just realised that all that crap you threw at me since Pa died was because you loved me; were frightened for me . . those years I felt imprisoned in a padded cell . . "

She sighed and started to say something, but he shook his head. His smile was still there but now it contained only affection.

"No, Mom. Hear me out. From that moment I was on a journey home. A long journey but a positive one. I was gonna see a lot of the world and come home and tell you that I loved you but I had to lead my own life. My blood was rare – but it was good blood – it worked, like everyone else's. I was gonna be firm with you; and I guessed that, because I'd taken off and left once, you'd understand and let me be, and kind of love me enough and not too much."

Up to now he had been looking into her eyes, but now his gaze dropped again to the table, and his voice became quieter.

"And then for months I was on that island, and every time they took my blood they took hope and some of my soul. You were always in my mind – but in sorrow. I'd never be able to tell you the words I'd rehearsed. Never show you a kid who's finally understood." He drew a shuddering breath "Then at the end, when it seemed all over – when I was looking up at those bastards Lascelles and Okello – seeing the filthy fascination in their eyes – you were there. With a goddam gun in your hands – my mother!"

He looked up at her.

"Then we came back here and everything was roses – except that I was terrified."

"Terrified?"

"Yes."

Suddenly he grinned. His head was on one side, his eyes narrowed in relief and amusement. "Terrified because all the things I wanted to tell you were out the window – until a couple of minutes ago. You see, Mom, after what happened, after all you went through and got me out – how in hell could I tell you that I wanted to live my own life? Be really independent? Think about it, Mom. How could I say 'Listen I want to take off for a while again?' Or if you suggested I come home for a weekend, how could I say no? Even if there was some girl I wanted to be with instead. How could I tell you that I love you – but it was all part of being just a normal everyday son?"

"But Garret . . ."

"No, Mom. Wait. While you talked of getting a job – and seeing me on my way – I was terrified. I'd be down in Florida wondering whether if I phoned you once a day it would be enough. Whether I was being grateful enough. Should I come home two weekends a month or three?" He shook his head. "I knew you would deliberately try to make it easy – we talked about it. You would never again be a clinging mother – but, Mom, after what happened I didn't know how to handle it myself. How does a son love a mother who's just saved his life?"

She was beginning to understand. He saw it in her eyes.

"You thought I might be worried about your feelings for Ramesh. On the contrary. I know you love him. You've been suppressing it – not even admitting it to yourself. I can see it and feel it every time you talk about him. Maybe that's why I kept asking about him. There's no problem. You go to him. We both have our own lives – the way it should be . . ."

There was a silence, then she murmured: "I don't know . . . It's not easy. I'd be so far away . . ."

He pushed his chair back and stood up and walked round behind her, leaned down, put his arms around her shoulders and his cheek next to hers.

"Mom. If there's one thing we found out these months, we'll never be far apart. No one can separate us – and I guess wouldn't want to. As for getting there, take some of that damned money they gave us."

She shook her head pensively.

"No. That's yours . . . I'll work a while . . . save up. Maybe in a few months."

It was not a few months. Two days later the travel agent rang. A mystery story. An agent in London had forwarded a ticket. The donor was anonymous.

Mogadishu was brown, odorous, dirty, hot and expensive. He stocked up with fuel, water and provisions and pressed on. Two weeks later he discovered that Djibouti, apart from a synthetic French veneer, was worse than Mogadishu. He had the added disappointment of finding no mail waiting. Not realising the abysmal postal service of the region he sailed up the Red Sea in an aura of loneliness.

The transiting of the Suez Canal quickened his interest. There was not a great deal to see but he enjoyed the sensation as *Manasa* glided through the desert.

He stayed at Port Said only long enough to take on fuel and water. As he sailed out into the Mediterranean his dominant feeling was that in spite of his early dreams he did not enjoy being alone. He realised that it was the reasoning of an addict. He had been exposed to friendship and affection and craved them, but he had also been exposed to love . . a love that he found difficult to live without.

The realisation profoundly saddened him. His feelings were a result of a brief period in his life. Circumstances or fate had decreed it. Now fate had taken it all away, leaving him empty.

He motored into the Larnaca Yacht Club on Cyprus two days later. Six weeks of isolation had left him empty and pessimistic. Lack of mail in Djibouti had convinced him that the strands of his friendships, like old rope, had frayed and parted.

There was a stiff breeze blowing inshore and the man-made harbour had a difficult entrance With utmost concentration he guided *Manasa* in through the narrow gap. Because of the wind and the surging sea he had the engine on full revs. He swept in to calm water and, as he reached for the throttle, a shout rolled across the small harbour.

"Ramesh!!!"

He jerked his head up and saw Cady standing on a jetty fifty yards in front of him, his right arm held stiff and high, his fist clenched in salute. Lani was enclosed in the sweep of his left arm.

In an instant depression dropped away, and emotion welled up. He was blinded with tears. He wiped an arm across his eyes, half-focused and saw another misty figure standing next to Lani. He shook his head and looked again.

It was Kirsty, head tilted, a smile on her lips. She was looming closer. Then the smile vanished and Cady shouted urgently, "Slow down, Ramesh! Slow down!"

He came out of his daze and grabbed the throttle, pulled it back into neutral and then into reverse. *Manasa* slowed and, like an old lady, slipping on ice, swung her stern and with a reproachful squeal scraped down the jetty.

Cady roared with laughter but Ramesh heard nothing. He was looking at Kirsty, ten feet away, reading the message in her eyes.

29

At the club house there was a wad of letters waiting for Ramesh. The secretary handed them to him with a stern look. He did not approve of single-handed sailors, especially those who scraped his jetty.

Ramesh and Kirsty were oblivious They turned hand in hand and walked to the bar.

"I did not expect you to be here."

She smiled. "Neither did I. I'll tell you about it later. I'm so happy, Ramesh." She leaned across and kissed him. "Read your letters, but keep the three from me until later. I hadn't realised I'd be here when you read them "

He sorted through them. Several had been forwarded from Djibouti.

There was a thick, official looking letter from London He left it to the last. Thirty years as a *babu* had left him suspicious of officialdom.

The other letters represented a cobweb of his recent life.

They came from Jaran Singh, in Bombay Guy and Marie-France and another from Dave Thomas in the Seychelles, Murphy and Howard and Harriet from Dar es Salaam.

Finally he opened the thick envelope, postmarked London. Inside was a three-paged typewritten epistle and a blue envelope with a spiky scrawl addressed: Ramesh and Kirsty.

Puzzled, Ramesh first read the typed pages. The others watched as he hunched over the table, his brow furrowed.

He finished, and looked at the blue envelope. Slowly, as though it was a fragile, ancient parchment, he picked it up and prised it open. He slid out the pages and started to read. There was a stillness about him. His face radiated a profound sadness. Several times he looked up into Kirsty's

enquiring eyes. He was a long time reading. The others felt no impatience. When he finished he shuffled the pages neatly together and held them in his hands. Then he looked up at Kirsty and silently passed them over.

He watched as she bent her head and read the words. Both Cady and Lani felt they were encompassed in a moment of deep intimacy.

She finished reading and put the pages on the table. She raised her head and looked at Ramesh. Their eyes conducted a silent dialogue. A question was offered up tentatively and answered positively A glance contained a promise, a lowered eyelash became a signal.

She looked across the balcony to the white-capped sea and struggled to find the words.

"Ramesh Is it possible to be so sad and so happy at the same time?"

He made no answer. He seemed not to be breathing. He was looking at a spot somewhere over her right shoulder.

Again she groped for words.

"Such a wish must be honoured. Like the green light at sunset."

They stood up and he took her hand. They turned to look at Cady and Lani. Ramesh said,

"Read the letter. You are part of it."

They walked out on to the balcony and stood at the rail. He had an arm around her shoulder. Hers was around his waist.

Cady slid the pages towards him, pulled the bottom one out, saw the signature, 'Jack Nelson'

Lani leaned over and together they read the words

Dear Ramesh and Kirsty,

Old men have dreams. Old men who are dying have vivid dreams: maybe a last wish that can only be fulfilled by others.

You are the others.

I love you both. Yes, love. I'm not embarrassed to write the word. I'll be gone when you read it. Nothing but lying doctors and nurses who smile with their teeth and can't keep pity from their eyes.

I was feeling sorry for myself when your letters came – both within a day, from thousands of miles apart.

Worst thing about dying is the futility. Maybe having children eases that.

I don't have children and I've felt the futility. But when I got your letters it disappeared.

I was part of it. I was there in Zanzibar.

Ramesh, when you pulled the trigger and shot Okello, my finger was next to yours on the trigger.

Kirsty, when you held your son in your arms mine were alongside them.

Sentimental slush.

But when you count hours, sentiment is a pain killer.

I know you both so well. I love you . . . and that big ape Cady, and Lani – something treasured.

Why did you come so late?

My own fault. You were always there. I was blind.

Thank God you came and opened my eyes.

I know you well.

Kirsty, you write that Garret will go to college. He is provided for. You are vague about your own future.

Ramesh, you write about your coming voyage – the pleasure of being alone on *Manasa*. You can fool the world but not a man leaving it.

The party at the Northolme. The night before you left. I watched you. I like to think that you didn't realise it yourselves. But I saw it. You were in love.

So this is my dream:

Kirsty, you will see your son, unfettered, make his way in life. And you will have your own.

Ramesh, a voyage must have an end – or a meaning. You love each other.

But the pain killer has substance.

I don't apologise for interfering. I sent Kirsty the airline ticket to Cyprus.

With this letter is another one from my lawyer.

I have left you my bungalow on Mahé and some investments which provide what my lawyer calls a comfortable living.

My wish is that you turn *Manasa* around and go back.

Kirsty, you write of the beauty and fascination of Aldabra. Explore it. And a new life.

Ramesh, explore it with her.

P.S. The stupid baggy shorts are in the bottom left hand drawer.

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